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Overcoming Perfectionism

Jenny Gould

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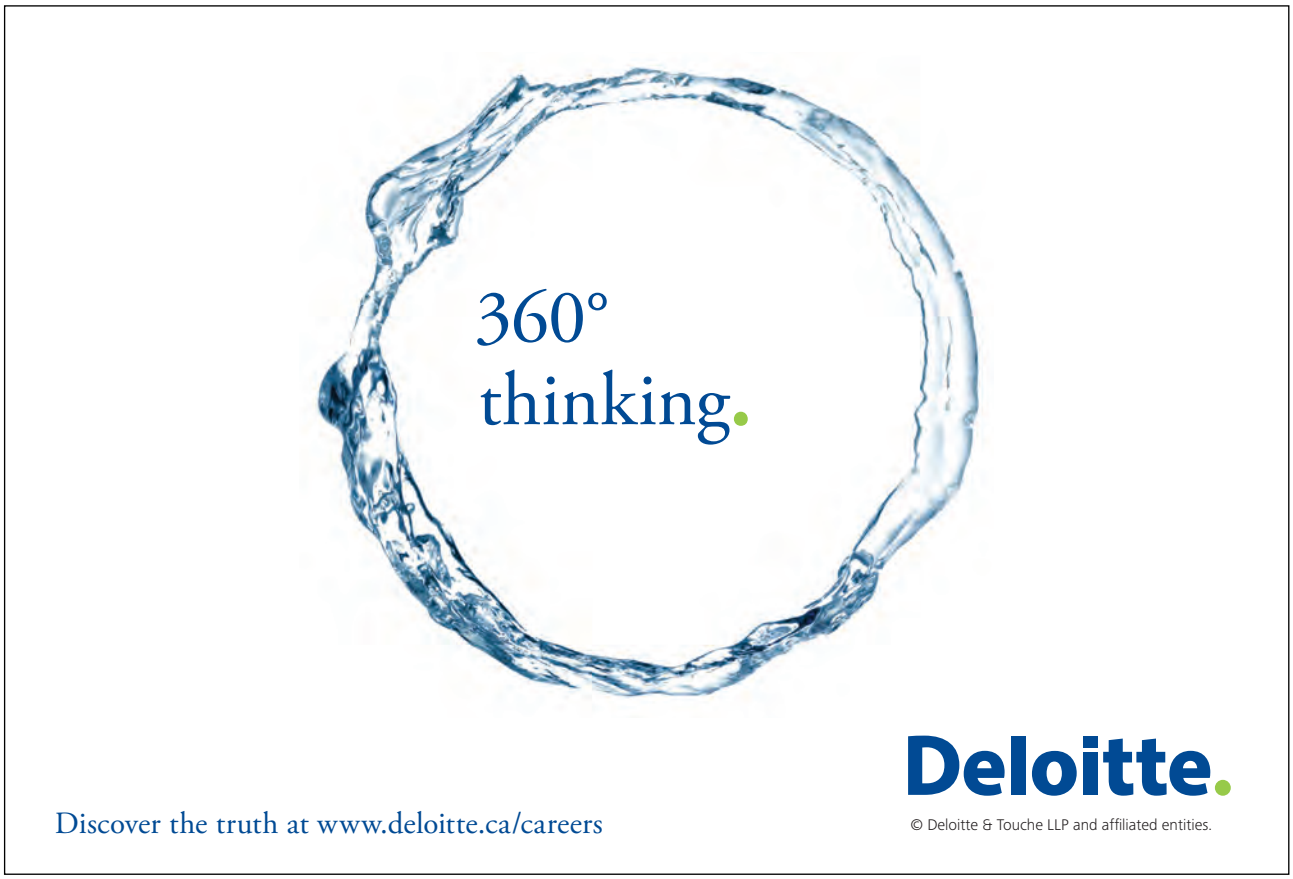

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Introduction

We live in a world where the pace of life is phenomenal. We have to work harder, faster, more efficiently, longer hours and with less job security than ever before. This environment is a very difficult one for the perfectionist, who is driven not so much by the desire for success, but by the fear of failure and need for control. They have unrealistic expectations of themselves (possibly others too) and feel they can never achieve enough and never be good enough. They feel unable to bask in the pleasure of achievement or really enjoy their relationships.

I hope this book will give you a real insight into the subject, and help you understand yourself and others better. You will learn how to think differently and how to behave differently. With this increased self-awareness, a real desire to change and some tools to help you, you *can* overcome crippling perfectionism.

Author Profile

Jenny Gould is a stress management consultant, trainer, executive & life coach, cognitive behavioural and clinical hypnotherapist. She has provided coaching, training and therapy to people from all walks of life, including senior business people, celebrities and those in the media.

Jenny is also a **writer, speaker and broadcaster**, regularly appearing on TV and radio as an expert contributor on a range of subjects, in particular on the issue of stress. She has a monthly slot on BBC Radio Oxford as their resident 'Agony Aunt'. A lively, warm and engaging speaker, Jenny's talks are thought provoking, inspiring and entertaining.

Through her company, **The STP Consultancy**, Jenny offers stress management advice and training to companies and organisations of all sizes. She has had many years experience herself as a senior manager in the corporate sector, and has expertise in the management and development of individuals and teams. An experienced and sought after trainer, she runs training courses on subjects such as stress, conflict, assertiveness, dealing with difficult people etc for organisations large and small. She is also a trainer for Relate 'the relationship people.'

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Having a life-long interest in personal development, Jenny is passionate about people and their potential. In all of her work she seeks to encourage and motivate others to believe in themselves, to get the very best out of life. She brings to her role a wealth of experience, allowing her to work successfully with people on a wide range of issues. Jenny has a private practise in Oxford, England, and works with her international clients via **email, phone and Skype.**

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1 What is Perfectionism?

1.1 What do we mean by the term 'perfectionism'?

It seems that experts can't agree on an exact definition, however if it were only about achieving high standards then the perfectionist would feel great, but the truth is they often feel far from great. That's because the goals of the perfectionist are either unachievable or achievable only at great personal cost.

Dr David Burns, clinical psychiatrist and well known author of many books including "Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy" defined perfectionists as people "whose standards are way beyond reach or reason" and "who strain compulsively and unremittingly toward impossible goals and who measure their worth entirely in terms of productivity and accomplishment". Their main drive is to avoid failure.

If you don't fail or make mistakes then you aren't really living your life. Let's face it, it would make you a pretty unpleasant person to be around if you *could* achieve perfection! Being authentic, keeping it real, warts and all, is what connects us with other people.

The same characteristic that brings success and respect can leave perfectionists feeling dissatisfied and unhappy. They relentlessly strive for extremely high standards and judge their self-worth largely on their ability to achieve such unrelenting standards. They feel unable to bask in the pleasure of achievement or really enjoy their relationships.

> "Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life and is the main obstacle between you and that shitty first draft. I think perfectionism is based on the obsessive belief that if you run carefully enough, hitting each stepping stone just right, you won't have to die. The truth is that you will die anyway and that a lot of people who aren't even looking at their feet, are going to do a whole lot better than you, and have more fun while they're doing it" *Ann Lamott "Bird by Bird, Some Instructions on Writing and Life"*

At worst it can lead to depression, severe stress, chronic relationship problems, alcoholism, eating disorders and many other health problems. Of course, as with all personality traits there are degrees of perfectionism, and it manifests itself in a variety of different ways as we will discover in later chapters.

We live in a culture whose values seem to re-enforce and encourage this way of thinking and behaving. That coupled with the fact that perfectionism starts very early in life means we get used to the discomfort and don't consider it to be in any way dysfunctional. We just know life isn't giving us the fulfilment we seek, but we can't put our finger on why that is, so we just get on with it. Perfectionism causes so much unhappiness, but when you finally accept it's impossible to control everything - it really is liberating! With increased self-awareness and understanding, a real desire to change and some tools to help you, you *can* overcome crippling perfectionism.

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Perfectionists relentlessly strive for unrealistically high standards. Their main drive is to avoid failure.

1.2 The Healthy Achiever v. The Perfectionist

So, the perfectionist's overwhelming concern is about avoiding failure, disapproval and rejection. That is quite different from the individual with high standards, with a healthy desire to achieve and be successful, but who knows that things don't always work out as well as they hoped. These healthy high achievers accept they won't always get it right; instead they learn from their mistakes and move on.

Perfectionism can be a definite obstacle to success, not just due to high levels of anxiety and chronic stress, but because of the time and energy spent on less important tasks. Perfectionists feel their work is never complete, never quite good enough. Because they fear disapproval and rejection more than anything, all activities tend to be equally important , whether it be a simple email or a major project, and this can lead to procrastination and indecision.

In fact perfectionists probably reach their potential less often than their equally able peers. Both healthy achievers and perfectionists have high personal standards, but failing to meet those standards is more stressful for the latter than for the former.

The Healthy Achiever:

- Sets high standards which challenge and stretch them
- Is not overly concerned about making mistakes Sees it as part and parcel of the learning process
- Learns from failure. May feel disappointment but moves on quickly
- No-one enjoys criticism or disapproval, but they don't let it affect their sense of themselves
- They see feedback as something they can learn from.

The Perfectionist:

- Never really satisfied with their work; it never feels completely finished
- Standards are unrealistically high and unlikely to be attained.
- Finds criticism very difficult, even distressing
- A mistake can affect their self-worth and lessen confidence in their ability
- Can become defensive and over-emotional when they discover a mistake
- Often feels anxious or worried about being 'good enough'

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1.3 The Development of Perfectionism

Since self-awareness and understanding are at the heart of overcoming perfectionism, we must first look at why and how it develops. The general consensus amongst the experts seems to be that perfectionists are made not born, in other words it's likely to be more 'nurture' than 'nature', and that our childhood experiences have a profound influence. Having said that though, human beings are infinitely complex and it is impossible to say conclusively that it is all down to our parents, or indeed our 'perception' of how things were when we were young.

It has also been argued that perfectionism is a product of the education system - children are expected to 'perform' in exams early on in their development, and indeed some teachers may be adding fuel to the problem by reserving praise only for impeccable work and behaviour (Barrow & Moore, 1983). We can also be vulnerable when we reach adolescence, which is a time of heightened self-consciousness and social evaluation.

So there are likely to be parental and environmental factors, as well as factors arising from the temperament of the child itself, indeed we may well find in the future some biological basis for many of the aspects of personality that we find challenging.

1.4 Parental Influence

It is however safe to say that a major predictor of perfectionism is criticism - from parents, teachers and other figures of authority. "Overly demanding and critical parents put a lot of pressure on kids to achieve." says Randy Frost, Professor of Psychology at Smith College in Massachusetts, USA. "Our studies show that is associated with perfectionism." From our earliest days it can seep into our psyche, resulting in a pervasive sense of not being good enough, and having a profound effect upon how we grow and develop as people.

> "Most people who are successful set very high standards for themselves. They tend to be happy. What turns life into the punishing pursuit of perfection is the extent to which people are worried about making mistakes" *Randy O. Frost*

So this parental behaviour is often at heart of the problem, by being over-demanding and excessively critical they teach us that we can never be good enough. That criticism may accompanied by anger, irritation or disapproval, however criticism need not necessarily be overt. It can be transmitted in subtle ways, for example just by a sigh or raised eyebrow.

It can also be *implied* - when a child feels under pressure to perform to very high standard, that in itself that can be interpreted as criticism. As a child you feel that failure to meet those parental expectations will lead to a withdrawal of approval and affection.

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A major predictor of perfectionism is criticism, from parents, teachers and other figures of authority.

Parents' need to control their children in this way is often complex – it can be born out of fear of the child's growing independence in a dangerous world ('anxious rearing') or it can be about loss of status if your child doesn't reach those high levels of attainment . And of course we all fear disapproval and rejection by our parents – it's something that we will go a long way to avoid.

If you are already a parent, or hope to be one in the future, remember this - it's **effort** that should be praised in your offspring, as opposed to intelligence or achievement. That energises the child and has a much more positive emotional impact.

Parents can cause the problem in other ways too, not just by being excessively critical. If they themselves are overly concerned about making mistakes, the child can pick up on that and learn to model that same behaviour.

Let's face it though, apportioning blame is not very helpful and we can never know for sure how the problem developed initially. What is important is that we take responsibility for reducing the negative effect it has on our life, now and in the future.

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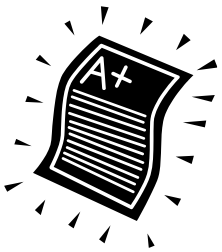
1.5 Gifted Children

In my research for this book I found some interesting research about academically gifted children and perfectionism. Historically there has been a commonly held belief that highly gifted young people were more likely than other students to exhibit perfectionist tendencies.



In fact several research studies (eg Parker 1997) have shown that most academically talented students are *no more* likely to exhibit these traits than their peers . It was those whose parents focused on high grades and achievement-related goals that were more likely to display dysfunctional perfectionism than those whose parents focused on learning and personal intellectual growth.

1.6 The Need for Control

So perfectionism is about adapting to deal with early feelings of uncertainty and insecurity, and it is this fear of uncertainty that often leads to us adopting rigid rules which can be paralyzing. What's more, having this continual drive to be perfect makes it difficult to follow our passion, to be creative, to become excited about new ideas and interests.

> We want clear unambiguous answers to problems and so we become rules driven, rigid thinkers.

For most people this is unlikely to lead to a clinical condition, however perfectionism does lead to the development of an obsessive personality trait, and a disproportionate need for **control** - control of ourselves, our feelings, other people and the things that happen to us. But the notion of control is a myth – truthfully, how much in life can we actually control?

'All or nothing' thinking is very common. Perfectionists think of themselves as either in control or out of control, right or wrong, happy or unhappy and the more they think in those terms, the more likely they are to re-enforce their perfectionism, even to point of it causing mental health issues. And the problem is that much of this 'thinking' goes on just below the level of conscious awareness, where it can't benefit from analysis and scrutiny.

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1.7 Obsessions and Compulsions

Many perfectionists will be driven by the need for excessive orderliness or structure, tidiness, fixating on the detail, checking and rechecking. This is probably the type of perfectionism most of us can relate to, tending to affect us only in certain areas of our life. Work is an obvious area where these tendencies will show themselves; in the home they may take the form of obsessive cleaning and tidying; and hobbies offer another avenue, particularly hobbies which are based on collecting and cataloguing activities.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this book, perfectionism ranges from very mild to severe (needing clinical intervention) - in fact it is thought that up to 80% of people experience obsessions and compulsions from time to time (Antony, Downie and Swinson 1998), making it in moderation, pretty normal really! For most people intrusive thoughts and compulsive behaviours don't cause any real problems – we may avoid sitting on a public toilet seat for fear of contamination, or check locks or appliances a couple of times, but these don't really cause any distress or interfer in our lives.

Obsessions are unwanted thoughts, images or urges that occur repeatedly, despite efforts to resist them e.g. recurrent doubts about whether tasks have been done properly. *Compulsions* are the repetitive behaviours that occur as a *result* - we engage in them to try to reduce discomfort or anxiety, e.g. excessively checking and re-checking a piece of work to allay fear of mistakes. Compulsive behaviour can also lead to the over-use of alcohol, smoking, drugs, gambling, food, shopping, sex, risk-taking and so on.

Obsession over the fine details can take many forms, for example, a girl who is telling a story to friends, finds her boyfriend constantly interrupting because he feels the details are not exactly correct. Or the woman who, when she cooks using a recipe, has to follow it to the letter, even if it clearly needs some adjustment.

People who are perfectionistic often find it difficult to make decisions. They worry about making a mistake when faced with different options and it can affect almost any area of their life, even when making the simplest of choices - deciding what to wear or what to order in a restaurant – and can involve several changes of mind! As a result things can take us much longer than they need to take, leaving us less time for other (sometimes more important) tasks.

Perfectionists sometimes feel quite paralyzed by the enormity of a task. Because they tend to see things in rather 'black and white' terms, they see the task as one huge problem which threatens to overwhelm them, as opposed to taking a step-by-step approach. If I hadn't managed to modify my own perfectionistic tendencies, I would never have been able to start on this book - I would be continually putting it off!

> *Obsessions* are unwanted thoughts, images or urges that occur repeatedly, despite efforts to resist them. *Compulsions* are the repetitive behaviours that occur as a result - we engage in them to try to reduce discomfort or anxiety.

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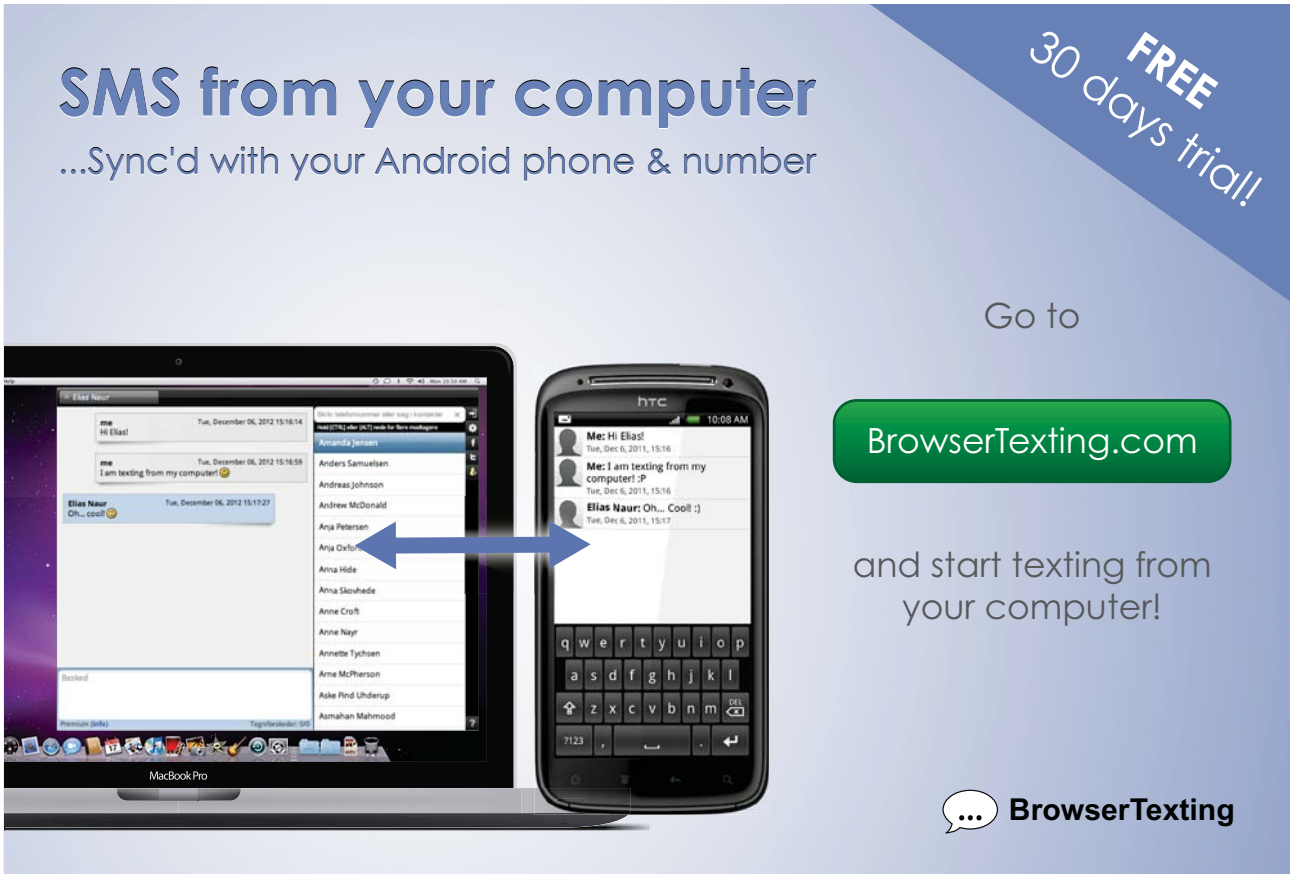
2 The Different Types of Perfectionism

2.1 General Personality Traits of the Perfectionist

Perfectionistic personality traits can cause a wide range of difficulties. Typically those would include difficulty making decisions, dotting i's crossing t's (checking and rechecking), over-analysing, ruminating, being too picky about potential partners – all common to what psychiatrists refer to as 'obsessive' – but only a very small proportion of people with this tendency would go on to develop obsessive compulsive disorder, a clinical condition for which one would normally seek therapeutic help.

Even though here we are talking about a personality trait, you might still benefit from some talking therapy or life coaching to help you work through the process of overcoming what can be a crippling habit. For many it's about self-esteem –feeling inferior to others, seeing them as more intelligent, attractive or successful than you. Some have 'emotional' perfectionism – ashamed of being vulnerable, depressed, anxious or embarrassed.



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Canadian psychologist Gordon Flett says that perfectionists reveal themselves in three distinct ways: first, a "self-promotion" style, that involves attempts to impress others by bragging or displaying one's perfection (this type is easy to spot because they often irritate other people); second, by avoiding situations in which they might display their imperfection (common even in young children); and third, a tendency to keep problems to themselves (including an inability to admit failure to others).

You can see how it might be difficult for the experts to agree on the theory and nature of perfectionism – it is a complex subject which overlaps with so many other aspects of our personality and behaviour. Whilst researchers over the past two decades have led to a better understanding of the problem, they have approached it from different angles, so we are left with many different perspectives on the subject. One way of assessing perfectionistic tendencies, the Multidimensional Perfectionism Subscales devised by Frost et al, looks at the following areas: concern over mistakes; doubts about actions; personal standards; parental expectations; parental criticism; and organisation.

Another measure, created by Flett and Hewitt, identified three main dimensions of perfectionism: self-orientated, other-orientated and socially prescribed perfectionism, broadly as follows:

2.1.1 Self-Orientated Perfectionism

We put pressure on ourselves to attain unrealistic and impossible standards. This is associated with self-criticism, intense self-scrutiny and the inability to accept any mistakes or failings in one's self. "I'm my own worst critic" you might hear them say. Sorotzkin (1985) describes a thinking style in which the individual feels compelled to achieve perfection in all areas of life as "the tyranny of 'shoulds' (more on that in Chapter 7). The problem is that low self-esteem and lack of self-belief can lead to the feeling that we will never achieve our goals in life, and that can produce a kind of immobilisation, where we lack energy and motivation to make things happen. So it's no surprise that this can lead to problems with depression.

> "Does 'anal-retentive' have a hyphen?" *Alison Bechdel*

2.1.2 Other-Orientated Perfectionism

We expect *others* to meet unrealistically high standards – it's a way of externalising the pressure they feel. It is most likely to develop when children are brought up in families which are extremely evaluative, where the emphasis is on everyone striving for perfection. This type of perfectionist often displays inflexibility, anger and intolerance, which may lead to problematic relationships, both at home and at work. Their excessive demands and expectations of others lead them to sometimes be seen as blaming, arrogant or dominant – "the people that matter to me should never let me down" they might be heard to say. They may have trouble delegating because they worry the results will be less than perfect. "If you want a job doing well, do it yourself" will sound familiar to them.

The same internal critical voice we use on ourselves, and the same impossible high standards we have for ourselves can be projected onto others. For example they may become distracted by poor grammar or a mistake when reading an article or a book, and even decide on the basis of that, that the whole thing is 'rubbish'!

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Some parents not only have high expectations (i.e high levels of controlling behaviour), but they sometimes over-idealise the child, leading to a form of narcissistic perfectionism. These people will strive for perfection and also believe they can achieve it due to the overly positive evaluation by their parents. This type may also be associated with maternal restrictiveness, leading to a desire to control others in adult life. It has also been suggested that these exceedingly high expectations of others may be a way of compensating for being mistreated or disappointed. It seems there are several possible explanations for this type of perfectionism!

> "When no-one around you seems to measure up, it's time to check your yardstick" *Bill Lemley*

2.1.3 Socially Prescribed Perfectionism

We believe that others expect us to meet standards so high, that they are impossible for us to reach. So these high standards are thought to be imposed by others, whereas the self-orientated perfectionist's high standards are self-imposed. This type is particularly potent because if we don't meet those standards we feel there is a high risk of disapproval or rejection. We fear the social consequences of failure, looking foolish or being criticised by others. This type is associated with adjustment problems such as greater loneliness, shyness, fear of negative evaluation, and lower levels of self-esteem. It can lead to anger and resentment (at the person who is apparently imposing the standards), depression (if they are not met), and social anxiety (fear of being judged by others).

> "Women are often so terrified of being imperfect. They don't want to be laughed at. It holds them back. Young men are taught to take criticism in a kind of impersonal way.
>
> Psychologists have documented that women believe that approval is like oxygen, which can make it too painful to be a risk-taker or leader because you're too visible and the criticism hurts so much. So one of the things that women need in the next millennium is more inner strength" *Naomi Wolf*

In reality these categories will overlap. Any categorisation is an attempt to clarify and simplify the subject, but remember that human beings don't fit into nice neat boxes and you may find yourself identifying with characteristics across all three categories.

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3 How Much of a Perfectionist are You?

3.1 Assessing Your Perfectionism

The following questions will help you identify how much of a perfectionist you are, and to what extent you exhibit traits of the three types of perfectionism: **self orientated**, **other orientated**, **socially prescribed**... as described earlier. Be brutally honest with yourself!

EXERCISE

Read each statement and then decide which number on the scale of 1 – 5 most reflects your opinion:

1 = Never true 2= Rarely true 3= Sometimes true 4= Often true 5= Always true

SECTION A: Self-orientated Perfectionism	
1. I find myself obsessing about the finer details of a task	
2. I find myself checking and rechecking work before considering it finished	
3. I get really upset when I feel criticised	
4. I felt that I could never meet my parents' expectations	
5. I can't stand it if my house/office is not organised meticulously	
6. I avoid trying things I might not be good at	
7. If I don't do well all the time people won't respect me	
8. I find it difficult to make decisions	
9. When I have made a decision I often doubt my choice	
10. I feel devastated if I make a mistake	
11. I worry more than most people	
12. When I have an appraisal at work I focus on the negative comments and ignore the positives	
13. My family or social life is negatively affected by the amount of time and effort I put into my work	
14. I feel it would be really awful if I missed a deadline	
15. I feel as if my perfectionism is holding me back in life	
Total for section A	

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SECTION B: Other-orientated Perfectionism	
16. I have been called critical or picky	
17. I get irritated when others don't get things right	
18. I have been told I am too judgemental, often thinking the worst of others	
19. People often seem on edge when I'm around	
20. I have been told I am controlling	
21. I am wary of being influenced, manipulated or controlled by others	
22. I think people who care for each other should not fight or argue	
23. I am suspicious of being duped by others	
24. People think I'm too fussy	
25. People have to earn my trust	
26. I find it difficult to delegate or get help in - they are unlikely to do a good a job	
27. I feel I have to do everything myself because no-one else can do things properly	
28. I become upset when others don't meet my standards	
29. I am sometimes pre-occupied with others' shortcomings	
30. I can't stand being interrupted	
Total for section B	
SECTION C: Socially-prescribed Perfectionism	
31. I worry about what people will think of me	
32. I want to be thought of as a nice person	
33. I am careful about how I phrase things so people will like me	
34. I find it very difficult to say 'no'	
35. I feel guilty if I take time for myself	
36. Asking for what I want is hard for me	
37. I avoid any situation which could be confrontational	
38. It is hard for me to complain about a poor product or service	
39. I feel anxious if I think someone might think badly of me	
40. If I have to speak in public I feel extremely anxious	
41. I avoid going out in public without being well dressed	
42. I feel nervous when meeting new people	
43. I avoid social situations because I feel intensely uncomfortable	
44. I feel inferior to people more successful, more attractive etc	
45. People will look down on me if I look foolish or make a mistake	
Total for section C	

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Your score

Now take your score for each section – A, B, C, to see where your tendencies lie with regard to the 3 types: self-orientated perfectionism; other-orientated perfectionism; socially prescribed perfectionism:

15-26 Little or no tendency

27-38 Mild to moderate tendency

39-50 Moderate to strong tendency

51-62 Strong to very strong tendency

63-75 Very strong tendency

So, having done that for each of the 3 sections, you should now have a better idea of your own personal make-up when it comes to the issue of perfectionism. Are your scores especially high in one area? Do any of those results surprise you in any way?

Now look at those questions where you scored yourself 4 or 5. For each of those ask yourself a second question: Does this characteristic cause difficulties in my relationships, work or leisure activities or does it interfere to with my ability to enjoy life in generally? If you say 'yes' to this for even a one or two questions you will benefit from learning how to change.

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So now you're in a position to decide which areas you want to focus on. What changes do you want to make? Of course changing habitual ways of thinking and behaving will involve some effort and perhaps a little discomfort but change *is* possible and it will be worth it! This could be the point at which you make the decision to create for yourself a more fulfilling, more relaxed and generally happier life.

3.2 Costs versus Benefits

Let me stress again that perfectionism is not the same as the healthy pursuit of excellence. Where would the world be without the likes of Edison, Einstein, Mozart, Hawking, Newton, Darwin ...to name but a few? The kind of perfectionism we are talking about in this book is seen in people who are stressed, driven, constantly unhappy with their achievements and their relationships.

In case you still aren't sure you want to change, let's look at the costs and benefits of being a perfectionist. The fact that you are reading this book suggests you suspect that perfectionism is a problem for you, and this awareness is of course the first step to considering the possibility of change. Ask yourself though – do you at some level feel that the benefits of having high standards outweigh the cost? If that's the case you may not feel inclined to invest much time and effort in the strategies in this book. It's really important to be honest with yourself.

Are you finding it hard to acknowledge the extent to which you are suffering as a result of this style of thinking and behaving? Could it be that your high expectations are causing problems for others - those you work with, those you live with? It may be worth getting a second opinion from someone close to you.

Perfectionism is one big con. As David Burns says "It promises riches and delivers misery. The harder you strive for perfection the worse your disappointment will become because it's only an abstraction, a concept that doesn't fit reality" After all there is nothing that cannot be improved if you look at it closely enough, so if you are a perfectionist you are guaranteed to lose.

> Perfectionism promises riches and delivers misery. The harder you strive for perfection the worse your disappointment will become because it's only an abstraction, a concept that doesn't fit reality" *David Burns*

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The chances are you have always been this way, so how could you know the joy of 'good enough is good enough', the joy of being average? Is that a scary notion? Giving up perfectionism is about confronting fear, because fear is what compels you to maintain the existing way of thinking and behaving that is – let's face it – making you suffer. So giving it up will feel uncomfortable, but what's the alternative? Are you going to continue to persecute yourself forever?

3.3 Cost Benefit Assessment

EXERCISE

Make a list of the advantages and disadvantages of being perfectionistic. It's quite likely you will have far fewer advantages than disadvantages, as you can see in the example below, which a client of mine came up with recently:

Advantages	**Disadvantages**
Others see how hard I work – how conscientious I am.	I waste a lot of time fussing and being indecisive.
I get to feel superior sometimes.	It often makes me feel so stressed that I can't concentrate and don't do my best work.
I try hard which can result in excellent work.	I always seem to be worrying about what others think.
My life is normally orderly and structured.	I hate asking for help and put it off until I really have no choice.
I have succeeded professionally doing it this way	I criticise myself and can't enjoy it when I do well.
	I will do anything to avoid doing a presentation or speaking in public!
	Since I'll never be perfect I suppose I'll always be somewhat depressed.
	I tend to be quite critical of my family/colleagues which causes arguments and bad feelings.
	However much I do, it never feels enough!

So, having completed your own analysis, what do you think? Are you keen to give it a go?

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4 The Effect of Perfectionism on our Lives

Let's look at perfectionism in a more pragmatic way now, to see how it affects the different aspects of life. Can you identify with any of the following?

4.1 The Drive for Achievement

You feel it would be terrible to make a mistake, to fail or fall short in your career, studies, hobby or other personal goal. You feel driven; you may be hypercompetitive, or a workaholic. Whatever level of success you achieve, it never feels satisfying because nothing is ever quite good enough. Were you that young kid who felt that your A minus wasn't good enough?

When you demand that you 'must' succeed you are not merely challenging yourself (which can be beneficial), but usually comparing yourself to others and feeling driven to be better than them. And when your main drive is to show yourself to be superior to others, that can lead to denigrating others in a rather 'fascistic' way.

So however outstandingly good you may be in a given field, there will invariably be others who are still better. You may then have an *unhealthy conditional* acceptance of yourself as opposed to a *healthy unconditional* acceptance of yourself. If you feel that in order to be a 'good', 'worthwhile' person you must have outstanding achievements, you may never discover your full range of talents and abilities; what you really want in life; who you really are. Imagine if you were made redundant or sacked from your job – you'd probably become depressed, be in a state of shock, because your sense of self is measured by your achievements, not by who you really *are*.

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Remember, it's not what actually you do or don't do that matters, it's the reasons behind it. Few of these behaviours are in themselves damaging, but reacting, rather than consciously choosing them simply perpetuates the problem; keeps us forever in the vicious circle of fear, the fear that we are not good enough, and therefore unlovable. I have personally worked with too many clients who are simply 'burnt out' as a result of this compulsion – driven to that point by the idea that good enough is *never* good enough.

> If you feel that in order to be a 'good', 'worthwhile' person you must have outstanding achievements, you may never discover your full range of talents and abilities; what you really want in life; who you really are.

4.2 Body Image and Health

When it comes to your body image you think you must have a perfect face or figure to be desirable or appealing. We are surrounded by messages about the need to be physically perfect "it will take years off you", "you too can be the perfect size 0", and these 'shoulds' fed to us by advertising, the media and society in general have an insidiously compulsive effect on us. These 'shoulds' can also apply to being healthy.

Taking your health seriously is important, but bearing in mind that many perfectionists feel the need to be in control of their physical state at all times, each new health craze has the potential to drive them crazy! The perfectionists' need to fix the outside in order to soothe the internal anxiety, when you combine that with our competitive nature, simply leads us to keep vainly striving to be 'perfect', which we can never achieve.

Body dissatisfaction is increasing and occurring at younger ages (Cramer and Steinwert 1998). There is a growing body of research showing a connection between perfectionistic body image and eating disorders. When the perfect diet, perfect exercise regime, perfect shape, or perfect weight elude them, the person with an eating disorder often experiences intense feelings of shame and self-deprecation – inherently perfectionist in nature.

People can sometimes become very focused on a particular aspect of their appearance – the shape of their legs, their hair (or lack of it), their nose – and in more severe cases find themselves unable to think about much else. They often consider themselves really ugly or even offensive to look at, even though most people would disagree. The problem comes when this imagined defect begins to interfere with normal life, and then it may fit the criteria for a condition known as body dismorphic disorder (BDD), which can be very debilitating and would benefit from psychological therapy.

> We are surrounded by messages about the need to be physically perfect and these 'shoulds' fed to us by advertising, the media and society in general have an insidiously compulsive effect on us.

4.3 Social Life

You are convinced that others will look down on you if don't meet their high standards. You feel you have to impress them with your accomplishments, talent, ability or intelligence in order that they like you or respect you. You may feel inferior to others who appear more attractive, more intelligent or more successful than you.

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Typical situations might be walking into a party on your own, initiating a conversation, going on a date, going to a job interview, confronting someone about a problem (e.g. a noisy neighbour), or talking to someone in authority or with higher 'status' than you.

Perfectionists are apprehensive about two aspects of the situation: firstly they have anxious thoughts about the situation itself and secondly they have anxious thoughts about seeming nervous in front of other people. They might worry that people will notice their neck flush or their sweating brow – as if being nervous is a sign of weakness.

So perfectionists often avoid situations that make them feel uncomfortable, or they may find ways of coping, by for example not offering an opinion in case others think them stupid. Sometimes they will go to great pains to make sure people don't notice their symptoms, eg not eating in front of others.

The problem with avoidance is that it makes things worse, not better, except maybe in the short-term. It can use a great deal of emotional energy; they may feel ashamed and angry with themselves, and their self-esteem plummets further. They might withdraw socially so they don't have to face the discomfort, and also because self-criticism can make us unwilling to share things about ourselves, for fear of what others may think of them. This might mean they don't have a very strong support system which we know makes us more vulnerable to stress and consequently to stress related illness.

> Perfectionists are apprehensive about two aspects of the social situation - they have anxious thoughts about the situation itself and they have anxious thoughts about seeming nervous in front of other people.

4.4 Relationships

You believe that couples should never fight, always respect/agree with each other. You might find it difficult to form lasting relationships because they don't need to meet your high standards. You might have a romanticised, idealistic view of relationships, and initially put your partner on a pedestal until you find they are fallible (i.e. not perfect). And yet there are no perfect relationships, because they are made up of fallible human beings - two different people often pulling in different directions!

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The perfectionist's deepest need is for control – where everything is predictable and 'safe', and it is that which probably causes the greatest problem in their relationships. They begin to focus on the negative aspects of the relationship and end up sabotaging them. They become pre-occupied with people's short-comings, often using 'all or nothing' language e.g. "you never get it right", "you always let me down". These are the voices they were brought up with and unintentionally play back in relationships.

They may exhibit 'entitlement', in other words they feel entitled to certain treatment, demand respect, and get excessively frustrated or angry when other people, or the world in general doesn't measure up to their expectations. They like things to go the way they expect, and generally don't appreciate surprises - often that includes nice surprises as well!

Of course another significant way in which perfectionist's relationships suffer is that they can be very focused on their work – indeed probably most of their compulsivity is expressed through their work. This manifests itself in their driven workaholic-like behaviour. They are often stretched to the limit, constantly tired, tense and unable to relax. Some perfectionists can drive their nearest and dearest crazy with their need for things to be 'just so', and this is dealt with further under the 'Obsessive compulsive tendencies' heading below.

The perfectionist's deepest need is for control – where everything is predictable and 'safe', and it is that which probably causes the greatest problem in their relationships. They begin to focus on the negative aspects of the relationship and end up sabotaging them.

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5 Stress, Worry and Anxiety

5.1 Perfectionism and Stress

Stress is on the rise – all the research tells us that. We may have less hardship and disease than our predecessors , but the pressure on us seems greater than ever. The pace of life today is phenomenal. We all have to work harder, faster, more efficiently and longer hours and job security seems a thing of the past.

Technology and the internet mean that we have access to vast amounts of information, which in many ways is a wonderful thing. However the perfectionist may well find this overwhelming, intensifying the feeling that they can never ever know enough! And mobile communications mean that we are expected to be contactable at any time – I've had a coaching client who, unable to sleep because he couldn't switch off, was replying to emails at 3.00 am. Please!!

Our expectations have increased along with the range of choices available to us. So much has changed over the last 50 years - there was a time when we each knew our 'place' in life. It was defined mainly by where we lived and what kind of work our fathers did. Doctor or miner, you were likely to follow a similar path, and probably not move too far from your home town.

We now have a far more mobile population; families today are often spread far and wide, communities don't exist in the way they once did and many of us live alone. In the past more of us found comfort in religion than do today, and all of this has resulted in less support (an important mitigating factor in stress) and an unnerving feeling of insecurity.

Because perfectionists have unrealistic expectations of themselves and others (and the world in general) - they also tend to hold rigid beliefs and have fixed ideas about how things 'should' be. They may cause themselves stress by 'demanding'..

- perfect solutions to practical problems
- the perfect job or relationship
- that they are successful in everything they do
- that others behave in certain ways
- that stress be minimal!

5.1.2 So What is Stress?

We all know what it feels like, but what is stress exactly? As nature's 'fight or flight' response, stress is very effective if we need to fight for our lives or make a hasty retreat, but not so appropriate when faced with a tight deadline or the need to make a public speech! There are lots of different definitions of the word.

A simple definition is 'stress is the response by the mind and body to pressure we feel we can't cope with". And the key word here is 'feel' – in other words it's about *how we think and feel* about the pressures on us. As the 1st century philosopher Epictetus, said 'People are disturbed not by things, but the views they take of them.'

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> Stress is the response by the mind and body to pressure we *feel* we can't cope with.

All the definitions tend to agree that it's not *simply* about the demands made on us (although we know there are real pressures at work and at home) – its actually about our *perception* of those demands, and whether or not we think we can cope with them. But perception is reality –how we interpret life's problems and apparent pressures depends very much on our individual beliefs and attitudes.

5.1.3 The Stress Response

In the same way that the antelope will experience a surge of neurochemicals and hormones at the moment he realises he is in danger (principally adrenalin, noradrenalin and cortisol), so do we. Our body switches into survival mode and the basic fear instinct takes over. Our blood supply is redirected to the heart and major muscles; heart rate and respiration increase; blood pressure increases; fats and sugars are released; digestion slows right down; pupils dilate; sweating increases.....and so on.

Once the danger is over the antelope returns to eating grass – his body switches back to its normal functioning mode and all is well. And that's very much the same for us if we have to run to avoid being run over by a lorry – we react and then relax once we're safe. However, if you've had an argument with your partner or lost your car keys you're unlikely to actually *use* that surge of physical energy, and we are left to 'stew' in those stress chemicals. The body does however gradually return to normal of course.

The problem comes when this is happening so often that we become over-sensitised to it. This heightened state of awareness or hyper-stimulation creates a kind of chronic stress, where our bodies take much longer to return to normal and it is that which can lead to all kinds of physical and mental problems. In order to slow us down our body gives us the 'gift' of illness – it is estimated that at least 75% of visits to the family doctor are in some way stress-related. Stress affects our work, our relationships and our ability to enjoy life.

We are only just beginning to recognise (or rediscover) the vastly complex relationship between our biology and our emotions, but there is no doubt that perfectionism plays a significant part in the development and maintenance of stress, so I make no apologies for devoting time to the subject.

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5.1.4 The Symptoms of Stress

Stress affects each of us differently, depending on our personality, background and experiences in life, and because we are all unique individuals the symptoms will vary – some will have more physical signs (e.g. headaches, back ache), others more emotional signs (e.g. easily upset, anxious) and others may have a predominance of behavioural symptoms (e.g. shouting, drinking too much). In my experience from working with stressed individuals, those suffering high levels of stress will be able to identify with many of the following signs and symptoms:

Physical Symptoms:

- Palpitations
- Pain & tightness in the chest
- Indigestion
- Breathlessness
- Nausea
- Tense shoulders, neck
- Tiredness
- Vague aches and pains
- Skin irritations/rashes
- Susceptibility to allergies
- Clenched jaw or fists
- Fainting
- Frequent colds or other infections
- Constipation or diarrhoea
- Rapid weight loss or gain
- Changes in menstrual cycle

Emotional Symptoms:

- Mood swings
- Increased worrying
- Feeling tense
- Drained, no enthusiasm
- Feeling angry
- Feeling guilty
- Feeling cynical
- Nervous, apprehensive, anxious
- Feeling helpless
- Loss of confidence
- Lack of self-esteem
- Unable to concentrate
- Withdrawal into daydreams

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Behavioural Symptoms:

- Accident proneness
- Poor work
- Increased smoking
- Increased drinking of alcohol
- Increased dependence on drugs
- Overeating or loss of appetite
- Change in sleep pattern, difficulty sleeping, waking up tired.
- Loss of sex drive
- Poor time management
- Withdrawal from relationships
- Irritability
- Working longer hours, taking work home more often.
- Unable to relax
- Not looking after oneself

So how many of those signs have you experienced in the past month say, and which of the categories do your symptoms mainly fall into? It can also be helpful to try to identify your early warning signs. For example do you notice your shoulders getting tense, feel anxious, or find yourself losing your temper? The key to dealing with stress is to catch it early. At regular intervals throughout the day, take a moment to scan your body for signs of tension. That way you can take some action to prevent it from building up – you can take back control before it escalates. I'll be giving you lots of ideas for reducing stress later on.

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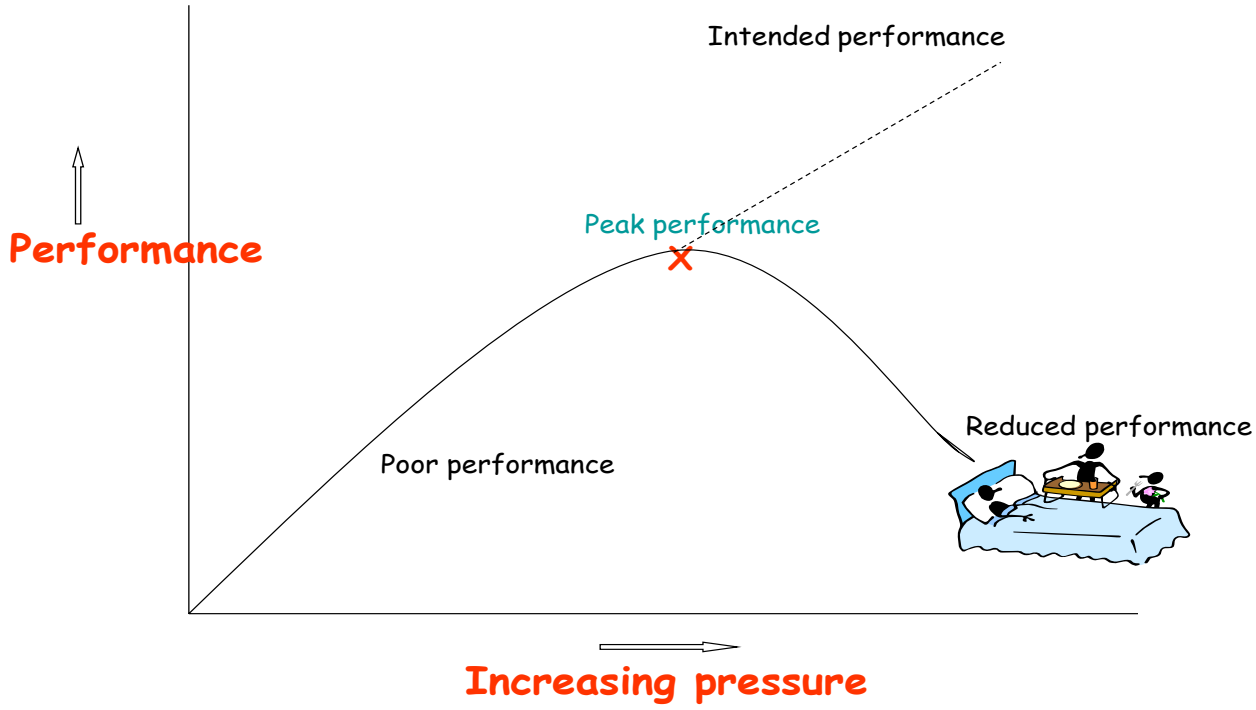
> "Suffering is optional, but you have to provide it for yourself."
> *-Dan Millman*

5.1.5 Stress and Performance

We seem to think that if we just work harder, faster, smarter, longer...that our performance will get better and better. There's just one problem with that idea – we are not machines. When we reach a certain point, our bodies begin to tell us "slow down". If we don't listen to those initial messages then our bodies speak louder, this time saying "no more" and if we still don't listen we find our physical and mental health becomes compromised. We can only keep going for so long before that happens. Think of it like this – we start with 'I want to....', then it becomes 'I have to....' and when we hit that brick wall – 'I can't'.

Pressure and Performance



As you can see from the graph, there is a point at which we feel at our best - our so called 'Point X'. At this point we're motivated, firing on all cylinders and doing a great job. But this is a tricky balancing act - it's hard to maintain and the temptation is to drive ourselves even harder. We can tolerate this increased pressure for a while, ignoring the warning signs, but before long our stress levels rise, our performance suffers and we risk illness. Take it from me - you might think you can continue to push yourself relentlessly – but you can't.

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My own story is one of 'crash and burn'. Like so many of my past clients, I thought I was super-woman, but discovered the hard way that I wasn't. Ten years ago I was working in international book publishing – a job I loved, in the beginning anyway. But the pressure to achieve results, as well as the gruelling overseas trips finally led to a stress related illness. I had driven myself on, thinking that if I didn't meet expectations I was worthless. Whilst I will always have perfectionist leanings, it's been modified significantly since those days, thank goodness. I now really *believe* that 'good enough *is* good enough'!!

5.2 Perfectionism, Worry and Anxiety

Worrying is a normal part of life, a natural response to feeling anxious, and only becomes a problem when it interferes with normal functioning. If you are a perfectionist, then anxiety is quite probably a constant companion, even if you aren't aware of it. Of course there are many reasons why you might worry, depending on what kind of perfectionist you are. Perhaps you worry about what people might think of you; your health or that of your family; lack of orderliness or not getting through as much work as you feel you should.

It's a habit and like any habit the more we indulge in it the more entrenched it becomes. BUT like any habit it can be changed – it might take some effort, but it *can* be changed. Plenty about that later. First it's important you understand the nature of worry and understand more about your own 'worrying' habit.

> "Worry never robs tomorrow of its sorrow, it only saps today of its joy"
> *Dr James A Walsh*

5.2.1 The Nature of Worry

There is almost certainly some genetic predisposing component to anxiety, making some of us more alert or hyper-vigilant. These are the people who metaphorically stand on the ramparts of the castle scanning with a searchlight for the advancing army to appear on the horizon. They are the watchful, alert individuals, who in our cave-man past would have been important members of the group! But many of us still sub-consciously think "If I don't stay vigilant, who will?". It's almost if by worrying we can control the likelihood of bad things happening. We don't want to be taken by surprise!

When we 'worry' it's usually about the future, thinking about what *might* happen, and often involves a "what if..." style of thinking. This includes lots of speculation, jumping to conclusions and fortune-telling. Considering one of the perfectionist's greatest fears is not meeting their own high standards, worrying is likely to be second nature. Then there's 'rumination', more associated with constantly running over a *past* event – for example, that important meeting where you said something you wish you hadn't. We torture ourselves about what we 'should' have done or said – a kind of retrospective control.

I remember when I first began my monthly appearances on BBC radio, as their resident Agony Aunt. After each show I found myself 'agonising' over what I'd said or what I'd left out. I went over and over everything. I played my mental video clip of the situation and often succeeded in making myself feel quite miserable, despite the positive things people said about how it went. I soon realised that people had more important things to do than to hang onto *my* every word, and in fact they kept asking me back year after year. So it must have been good enough.

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If we can't put past events behind us (having first learnt what we need to learn from them of course), then they will affect us in the future, causing pointless emotional pain and lack of engagement in our daily lives. It will also make us reluctant to try new things and take risks.

Socially-prescribed perfectionists in particular, because they need approval from others, will spend a lot of time worrying about doing or saying the right thing. This need to please others is often called 'good girl syndrome'– they try to do the right thing for all the people in their lives, but looking after everyone else's needs often means neglecting their own. In fact research shows that socially-prescribed perfectionists have higher scores on both the anxiety and depression scales than the other two types.

We all know that these anxious thoughts can be very difficult to turn off. In fact they are often just below the level of conscious thought, almost like a constant background noise that we only become aware of intermittently. They can take the form of a sense of foreboding, dragging us down and depleting our energy. These intrusive thoughts and images, create a kind of vicious circle, only make us feel *more* anxious and fearful. All of this over-thinking is hard work!!

> "The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven out of hell, and a hell out of heaven" *Milton*

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It's amazing how easily we can upset ourselves through the thoughts and images in our heads. In fact the primitive part of our mind can't distinguish between what is real and what is imagined, so our body responds accordingly, releasing stress hormones just as if it is *really* happening now. Of course the more vividly we imagine these things, the more tense we become and the worse we feel. The more aware you are of how your thoughts are feeding your worrying habit, the better – it's important to develop the ability to stand back and observe your 'thinking' self.

We'll be working on this later, but let's make a start now. Whenever you notice yourself worrying, try 'tuning' into your thoughts. Are you thinking negatively? What images are you playing?

5.2.2 The Effects of Worrying

The way in which worry affects us varies with the individual, but let's look at some of the most common effects. Something that we all have problems with now and again is sleep, and it comes as no surprise then that chronic worries can lead to problems getting to sleep, disturbed sleep, waking early in the morning and not being able to get back to sleep and so on. People often complain of chronic muscle tension making it really difficult to relax; generalised anxiety; chronic arousal; feelings of nervousness; restlessness; headaches; lack of concentration - pretty much any of those stress symptoms mentioned earlier.

5.2.3 What is a Panic Attack?

I feel I should take a moment here to talk about panic attacks, because a surprising number of us have experienced them at some time or other, even if not the full blown thing. The habit of excessive anxiety is often accompanied by hyper-awareness of the physiological effect of anxiety – e.g. increased heart rate, muscle tension, sweating, tightness in the throat – and in some instances this can lead to what we call a panic attack.

Although it feels very unpleasant, panic attacks are *not dangerous.* You might feel you're going to choke to death, have a heart attack or collapse, but the fact is this is simply an over-enthusiastic stress response. What happens is that you notice the physical sensations (e.g feeling of tightness in your throat) and that leads to a vicious circle of worrying thoughts and more physical sensations. The attack will pass (as it always does), and once you give it less importance it immediately seems less threatening.

5.2.4 Feeling Ashamed

Perfectionists often feel ashamed of negative feelings. If you feel you should always be happy and in control of your emotions it can be embarrassing to admit to feelings of depression, anger, anxiety or panic. If admitting to vulnerability is such a scarey idea then you are unlikely to talk about your how you feel, which can of course make things even worse.

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5.2.5 Over-Compensating

Excessive worrying can lead to over-compensating, so for example if you were to worry constantly about your partner leaving you, you might be continually seeking reassurance – which could well have the ultimate effect of pushing them away, resulting in exactly the outcome you so feared. Similarly if you were worrying about not making the grade at work you might work excessive hours and push yourself to the limit.

5.2.6 Resistance to Change

We sometimes have a deep-seated resistance to changing our worrying habit. For example, some people associate worrying with being serious-minded and conscientious. Perhaps on some level they think of happy-go-lucky non-worriers as being irresponsible, unrealistic, kidding themselves. Could this be you? For the moment I'm just asking that you are honest with yourself in order to increase your awareness of how you are maintaining *your* worrying habit. We will look at ways of changing that habit later in the book.

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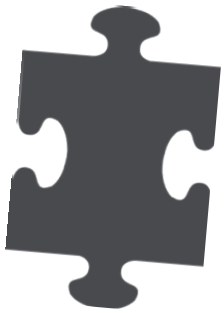

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6 Perfectionism at Work

Work should be one of life's greatest pleasures – a primary source of stimulation and social interaction, and something which gives us a sense of achievement, of having made a contribution and being valued. And we have also seen how the drive to be perfect can be the cause of so much stress, anxiety and general unhappiness in life. The modern workplace demands that we do more with fewer resources, juggle multiple tasks, be available at all hours and meet ever tighter deadlines – so it stands to reason that the perfectionists amongst us will be suffering more than ever in challenging economic times.

All three types of perfectionism, will have an impact at work: *self-orientated*, *other-orientated* and *socially prescribed*. There are bound to be consequences, for example, for setting unrealistic standards for personal performance, for having unreasonably high expectations of others and for needing the approval of others. Those who are more sensitive to criticism and higher demands are more likely to feel their jobs are stressful.

6.1 How Does Perfectionism Show Itself at Work?

When you start to think about the possible ways in which perfectionism can affect us as individuals it becomes clear that its tendrils can reach effortlessly into virtually every area of life. And it's not only at the individual level that it has an impact. What affects the individuals within an organisation will also affect the success of the organisation itself, because it costs time, money and energy. Remember perfectionism is *not* the healthy pursuit of excellence.

6.1.2 Procrastination

> "Tomorrow is often the busiest day of the week." *Spanish Proverb*

Procrastination significantly increases stress levels, for two reasons. The most obvious one is that in the end you *have* to do the task, but now you're under real pressure as the deadline fast approaches! The other reason is this. Just because you put something off it doesn't vanish – it stays with you in the background, like a cloud hanging over you. You carry it around and this has an insidious negative effect on how you are feeling.

Procrastination sounds like the straightforward behaviour we are all familiar with, of not getting down to what needs doing. However it is actually quite a complex issue, and involves emotions, attitudes and beliefs which we may not even be consciously aware of.

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There are many reasons why we procrastinate - we may have too many plates in the air, feel muddled, be bored, dislike the task, feel defiant, be daunted by the task, fear failure, feel tired/ill or be distracted by other issues. However for many of us procrastination is associated with the fear of not being good enough – apparently it's almost better to do nothing than risk failure! The problem is that this behaviour exacerbates feelings of failure and creates a vicious circle.

> Procrastination is a complex issue, involving emotions, attitudes and beliefs which we may not even be consciously aware of.

- **Difficulty Prioritising**. Worriers tend to have problems deciding on priorities because they give each piece of work equal importance. This failure to sort out which tasks need doing first means they simply don't get around to doing the important things, often wasting time on unimportant, less demanding activities. We all do this to some extent, but it's a question of degree - it *can* become a chronic problem and really hold you back.
- **Indecision**. Perfectionists often get to a point where they feel immobilised - like a rabbit in the headlights, unable to apply themselves to anything. The agonising over detail, the need for everything to be correct and the best it can be, can cause confusion and indecision.
- **Asking for Help**. When we worry too much about how other see us then we may find it hard to ask for help with our work. Have you ever been in a meeting with senior people and been asked to do a task – perhaps write a report, sort out a problem or produce figures for a potential project? What about if there is a key part of that task that you don't understand or need help with? How easy is it for you to *ask* for help? I remember occasions like this in my early working life, when I would be so concerned about looking stupid that I would spend ages trying to work something out for myself. In the end I usually had to ask someone anyway – how much easier to do that first as last! And a good manager will think no less of someone who asks for help – why would they?

6.1.3 Aggressive Behaviour

We've all come across those people in the workplace who 'don't suffer fools gladly'. Perhaps you are one of them. That kind of behaviour is often a sign of perfectionistic thinking. As we have already learned, when a person puts pressure on themselves to meet unrealistic standards, they are also likely to put pressure on others to meet the same high standards. When someone makes a mistake they over-react, labelling them as 'useless' or 'worthless'.

Sometimes their overly forceful behaviour is as a result of feeling that they must, at all costs, ensure the person clearly understands how important the task is. In other cases it can be fear of making a mistake or being criticised which leads to defensive feelings, coming across as aggressive behaviour.

The problem of aggression in organisations is a serious one, and these days in particular this behaviour is unlikely to do much for your career advancement. Bosses who alienate colleagues undermine the objectives of the organisation, having an impact on productivity, staff retention *and* of course the bottom line.

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6.1.4 Controlling Behaviour

"It's my way or the highway!"

Perfectionists feel anxious when not in control, and this can cause problems, particularly when it comes to delegation, because after all there is only one way to do things – his way! When we delegate a task it involves trusting someone else to produce results which we feel *we* will be judged on. This can make us come across as inflexible and uncompromising, as 'control freaks' or 'micro-managers'. Often they will blame those around them, the circumstances or the fact that it was 'last minute' if things don't go perfectly.

This tendency to be hyper-critical will have a negative impact on teams and relationships , especially when the organisation needs to bring in changes –new working practices, policies or structure.

6.1.5 Avoidant Behaviour

There must be so many perfectionists out there who have not advanced in their careers in the way they might have, given their skills and talents. Many of those will be people who have avoided tasks and situations which they find threatening because of the risk of appearing incompetent or looking foolish. They will pull back from anything where there is a risk of failure, and because of that they deny themselves new experiences, and the personal growth that goes with that. After all perfectionists seek certainty – and life is uncertain.

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They might hesitate when asked to take on a new role or project, worrying that they don't have the knowledge or skills. Their irrational thoughts lead them to believe that if they can't instantly be 100% effective, then they will have failed – that all-or-nothing thinking again! The other classic example of avoidant behaviour is when it comes to public speaking or giving presentations– many perfectionists say they would rather die than speak in public! They fear that the discomfort will be unbearable. They think in terms of 'what if..' and imagine themselves blushing, their hands shaking, or see themselves making a mistake and looking foolish.

Having made the decision to avoid the fearful situation they immediately feel a sense of relief, but that is only temporary because by avoiding something we simply reinforce the anxiety and stress associated with it, making it even more difficult to overcome it in future.

6.1.6 Negative Attitude

The socially prescribed perfectionist's need for approval can cause real problems at work. Most managers are too quick to criticise and too slow to show appreciation, and of course this can have a particularly damaging effect on the perfectionist, for whom approval is central to what makes them tick. This can lead to exhaustion, to feelings of cynicism and disillusionment – and an overall negative feeling towards their workplace, due to feeling unappreciated.

6.2 Perfectionism and Leadership

Perfectionistic managers are unlikely to make good leaders. A study undertaken by Fairplace in conjuction with Cass Business School, involving 54 managers from a wide cross-section of working environments, showed that those executives who are seen as successful leaders are also seen as open-minded, courageous, have personal impact, empower others, build strong teams and are adaptable - someone for whom you 'want to go the extra mile'. The most significant factors were 'trusted', 'presence', 'empowers', 'drive and energy', and 'personable'- all of which were seen as more important than 'completer finisher' for example.

Since a good leader will create a culture where mistakes are ok, where it is not always necessary to be right and where they are prepared to be seen as vulnerable, it's no wonder that the perfectionist will struggle with the transition to leadership. Many people reach senior positions as a result of having achieved a certain level of technical expertise - in engineering, IT, editing etc – but when they move into a leadership role they are often find themselves still getting tied up in the detail of operational issues, failing to delegate and being accused of micro-management.

They find it a real challenge to recognise that their job now is to inspire others and achieve results through them. This causes stress as they try to do everything themselves (and can't manage to do every task well), and has the undesirable effect of alienating colleagues, who then begin to lose motivation, commitment and effectiveness.

Another important aspect of leadership is the vision to create and shape the future of the organisation, which involves 'big picture' thinking, taking risks, and having the courage to try new ideas. All of this is very difficult if your main driving force is fear of failure.

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7 Changing Your Perfectionistic Thinking

So, hopefully I've convinced you of the benefits of changing your perfectionism habit. Perhaps thinking about the issue has allowed you to glimpse how much better your life could be with a different mindset. Recognizing that a change may be needed is a very important first step toward creating a more easygoing nature and achieving the inner peace and real success that comes from overcoming perfectionism. Of course it would be unrealistic to imagine you can wave a magic wand and everything will change overnight. It will be a gradual process, something that builds and gathers momentum as you begin to feel the difference. And you really *will* feel the benefits if you make the commitment to change.

> The brain seems to favour the status quo. Basically the unconscious mind prefers to maintain things the way they are. It uses a very basic yardstick - you survived yesterday didn't you, so why do anything differently?

But you need to be prepared – to know the enemy so to speak. Ingrained habits which have taken many years to develop will take a bit of shifting - any significant change has its challenges. It's important to remember this is *not* just another project which you absolutely *have* to do well at. Give yourself permission to take it one step at a time, and to recognise that at times it might feel a bit like three steps forward and two steps back – and don't be disheartened.

Just to remind you, here are some of the **benefits** or modifying the perfectionist in you:

Less stress and anxiety; you feel more relaxed; creativity increases; you are willing to take more risks; communication is more open and honest; relationships at work and at home improve; you use your time more efficiently; job satisfaction increases; you are more open to feedback and grow as a person....and life is more fulfilling and enjoyable. Doesn't get much better than that now does it?

Our thinking habits, attitudes and beliefs influence every aspect of our lives - our mood, our emotional resilience, stress levels, performance, relationships, and the potential to fulfill our goals and ambitions. But where do they all come from – how do they develop?

7.1 How our Beliefs Develop

Your beliefs are generalisations about the world, formed from all the things you have been told about yourself and the world around you from the minute you were born, and based on your limited experience of life. So in a nutshell you have created an image of yourself based on the opinions of other people, or what you perceived those opinions to be. Initially they were based on your interactions with parents, teachers and other 'grown-ups'. The problem is that when we are young we don't have the intellectual ability to question the things we hear, so we accept them as the truth.

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As we go through life we continue to create our image of ourselves, effortlessly nourishing and reinforcing those beliefs, and behaving in a way that fits with that image - a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. We search for evidence to support those beliefs, and we often don't notice any to the contrary – evidence that might show us how ridiculous that belief is.

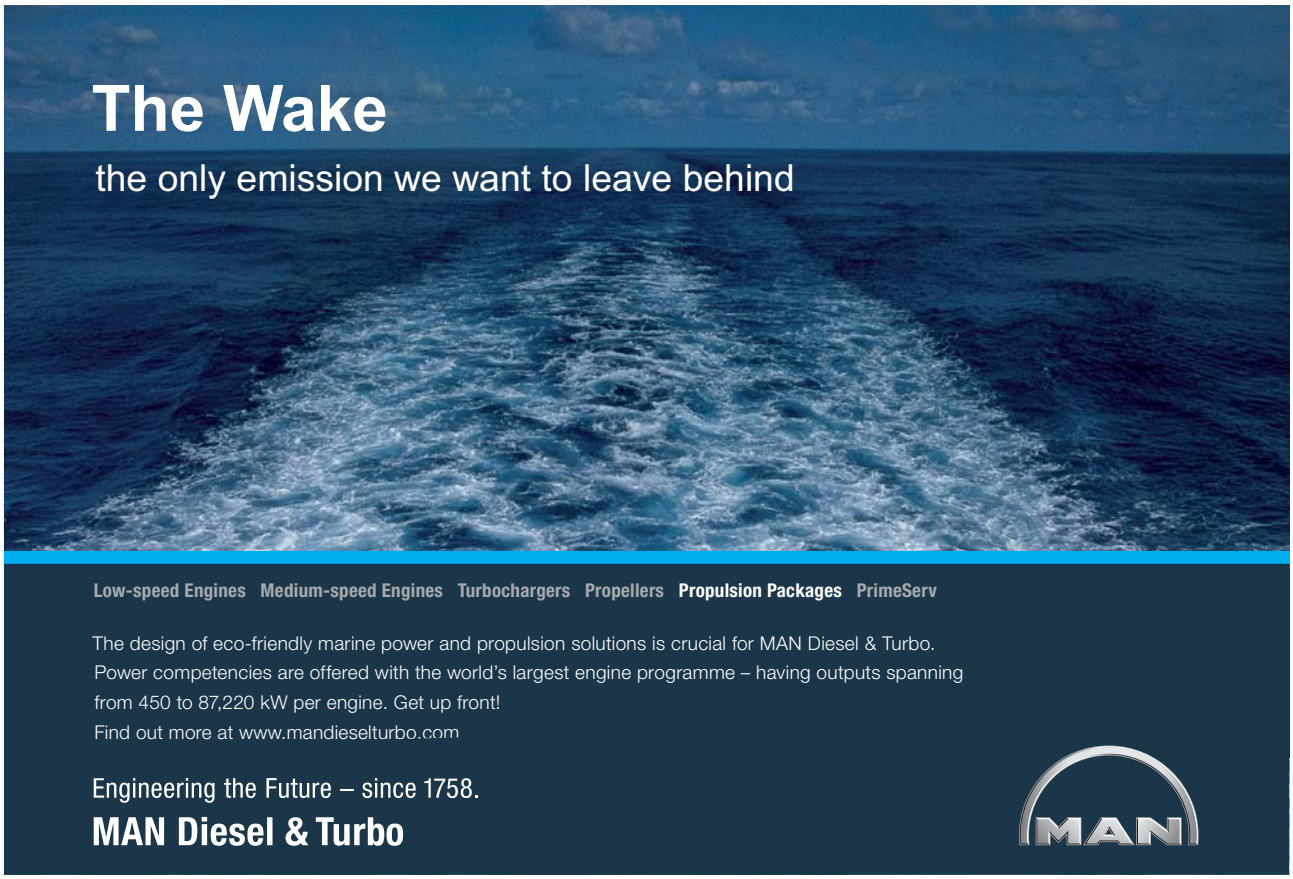
When I was young I remember my mother once introduced my sister as "the pretty one" and me as "the clever one". The truth is I can't even be sure it actually happened that way at all, but that's how it lives in my memory. So of course all my life I wanted to be the pretty one (the 'clever' bit didn't register at all) and I guess my sister wanted to be 'clever' – instead Mum often called her "airy fairy".

We get into the habit of ignoring all the positive things people say about us, choosing to focus on one small negative comment, because it fits with some irrational belief we have about ourselves. We get used to ignoring the evidence to the contrary.

Our beliefs create our unique perspective on the world, and as we grow and develop these beliefs form 'filters' through which we see everything around us, often blinding us to other possibilities. They're such an integral part of the fabric of who we are that we don't even really see them, let alone question them! Remember that your perception of what is true is not the same as something actually *being* true!

7.2 Irrational Thinking

So how do our beliefs influence our thinking and the way we feel? Well, these limiting beliefs lead seamlessly to what we call *automatic negative thoughts*. These thoughts are often just below the level of conscious thought, and they sweep over us so quickly that we are hardly aware of them. They create a kind of internal dialogue, which is triggered particularly when we are in certain situations.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These thoughts are rarely based in reality. They are invariably irrational and the product of thinking 'distortions'. They are unhelpful, self-defeating and don't stand up to scrutiny. In fact most of our bad feelings are the result of these illogical or distorted ways of thinking. And we all have them, to a greater or lesser extent. To be rational a thought must be: logical, empirical (a proven fact), pragmatic and flexible.

These thoughts are rarely based in reality. They are invariably irrational and the product of thinking 'distortions'.

However it isn't the thought *itself* that causes the problem – it's what that thought *means* to us – our interpretation of the thought. For example if you worry about making mistakes at work, what does that mean to you? Perhaps you fear terrible consequences or think of it as a sign of incompetence or weakness.

Becoming less perfectionistic will involve relaxing your standards *and* changing your perfectionistic beliefs. That doesn't mean reducing your standards across the board, but it does mean questioning them, recognising that they are not hard facts and then identifying which are unrealistic and which are not.

7.3 Changing Thinking Habits

We know that our thoughts affect our feelings, and so the first step is to become more aware of those thoughts, and remind yourself you can change your mood by replacing them with more positive, encouraging thoughts and images. Ask yourself 'how is this thinking helping me'? We constantly battle against what are normal human flaws in an attempt to become the person we think we ought to be. We worry that we'll be 'found out' - if people knew what we were really like, vulnerable and fearful, they would think less of us, disapprove of us, even reject us.

Ask yourself "How is this thinking helping me?"

In fact our shortcomings and failings are actually our source of strength, once we confront and accept them. Being open about them tends to dissipate the fear. Worrying alone eats away at us, making us feel isolated, and robbing us of our vitality. Call it your gremlin or your inner critic but it also goes by the name of 'FEAR'! It is that little voice that stops you doing anything risky - and of course, sometimes it's right to speak up!

But it's very insidious. Lurking just below our level of conscious thought, it's rooted in our ill-founded beliefs, continually seeking to reinforce them. Once you become more aware of that 'voice', and begin to question its validity, you can learn to turn the volume down, so that eventually you can hardly hear it at all. But be prepared, because even when you think you've tamed him, he pops up unexpectedly! The gremlin never completely goes away - but with some effort we can see to it that his voice gets fainter and fainter.

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Perfectionists often think in demanding ways – about themselves, other people and the world in general. In particular, because they see everything through the 'self-doubting filter' they tend to have a lot of self-critical thoughts, and we know that perpetual and unrealistic self-criticism is linked to low-self esteem – something that perfectionists are all too familiar with. **Why not take a moment to list as many of your self-critical thoughts as you can.** Getting those thoughts out of where they lurk gives you the chance to see them for what they are!

Perfectionists tend to have a lot of self-critical thoughts, and we know that perpetual and unrealistic self-criticism is linked to low-self esteem – something that perfectionists are all too familiar with.

The kind of thoughts that cause us to feel bad might be categorised like this:

1. **'Awfulising' or 'Catastrophising'** e.g. 'If I fail my exams it will be awful!' Will your world really be shattered?
2. **Low Frustration Tolerance.** You are easily frustrated, by others or the world in general. You probably find you can't tolerate the discomfort of boredom, or waiting, or certain aspects of your work. It's common to find yourself thinking or saying 'I can't stand it!'
3. **Damnation of yourself or others** – putting yourself down or labelling *others*, e.g. criticising the person (rather than their behaviour), e.g. 'what a complete moron he is – he's useless' He may be useless at some things, but how does it follow that he's a useless person?

7.4 Checklist for Challenging your Thinking

Which of the following 'distortions' do you recognise in your own thinking?

- Jumping to conclusions
- Mind reading
- Seeing things only from my point of view
- Thinking in 'all-or-nothing' terms
- Thinking in a demanding way about myself/others – 'musts', 'shoulds', 'have to's'
- Totally condemning myself or others because of one mistake
- Blaming myself for something that isn't really (or entirely) my fault
- Blowing things up out of proportion
- Expecting myself or others to be perfect
- Labelling myself or others ('he's just a loser', 'I'm really stupid', etc)
- Just seeing the negative side of things (discounting the positives)
- Fretting about how things should be instead of accepting and dealing with the reality
- Fortune-telling – expecting things to turn out badly
- Assuming I can't do anything to change the situation
- Concentrating on my weaknesses and ignoring my strengths

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If you are a perfectionist the likelihood is that you have ticked quite a few of those statements and often think in an irrational, distorted way.

7.5 Modifying your 'Demanding' Thinking

Do you have a rigid and demanding thinking style – "he shouldn't speak to me like that!" ... "people should always be grateful"? If so this will be adding significantly to tension and stress.

What is more helpful is to try to think more in terms of 'preference' - "I'd prefer it if he didn't talk to me like that, but I can't demand it". If we insist for example "I must not make a mistake" or " I must be liked by people I meet" we are saying this absolutely has to happen. And yet in reality we know that's not rational. We will make mistakes and we can't be liked by everyone we meet. You may well be liked by most people you meet, but not all. Insisting that you must be liked does not alter reality, however much you might insist on it!

So thinking in terms of preference – "it'd be great if people liked me, but if they don't, it's not the end of the world.." or ...."I wish he would be kinder to me, but I can't make him" ..." is more flexible and realistic. Somehow once we realise we can't change people, that we can't demand they behave in a certain way, it removes a burden from us - we feel lighter.

Similarly if you do a lot of 'awfulising' or think in 'catastrophic' terms this will make everything appear worse than it really is. How often is something SO bad? It's unlikely the world will end - the sky will still be blue. So resolve to **notice** what you are thinking, **challenge** the rationality of it and decide how you might **change** it. It takes a bit of practice but it's worth it – really. And slowly but surely these new thinking habits will feed back to those unhelpful beliefs and begin to change those too!

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Similarly if you do a lot of 'awfulising' or think in 'catastrophic' terms this will make everything appear worse than it really is. How often is something SO bad? It's unlikely the world will end - the sky will still be blue.

Another way of changing our thinking is to try looking at things from a different perspective, called 'reframing'. If we mentally stand back and ask ourselves what's another, more rational way of viewing this situation, or how might someone else view it, it can help us see things more clearly.

A typical example would be: instead of "It's terrible that I didn't get that job! They must have thought I was rubbish!", try " I'm disappointed that I didn't get the job, but there could be so many reasons why I didn't. It doesn't mean I'm no good, it just means that job isn't for me. There'll be other jobs and other days." If you notice self-critical thoughts, ask yourself what would a good friend say about it? Try to be kinder to yourself.

7.6 Thought Stopping

When you find yourself feeling unhappy or anxious, take a moment look at what's going on in your head. What are you thinking or imagining? You could think of excessive worrying as if it were a fairground merry-go-round, one with colourful horses going up and down. Sometimes those thoughts are going around so fast that we hardly know what they really are. It's like one big blur of worry! When that happens there are two things you can try:

- Just imagine you are slowing that merry-go-round right down to a stop. Slowly the individual worries come into focus and are clearly identifiable. Then you can use some problem solving skills. Look at each one and ask yourself what (if anything) you can do about them. Are they rational thoughts or can you tell yourself something more helpful? Perhaps there is something practical you can do about this 'worry'? Get tough on worrying!

- Another technique you can use is 'thought stopping'. Just firmly telling yourself 'STOP' can work really well. If you're in a room full of people probably best said to yourself , but it's very effective if you *can* say it out loud! It sometimes helps to imagine a stop sign, a hand or traffic lights or a big neon sign – whatever works for you. It's simple, but I use it myself quite often and I like simple ideas!

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7.7 Using Your Imagination

It isn't only your thoughts that can upset you, you need to also become aware of the images in your head and the powerful effect they have on how you feel and behave. Our thoughts and images are giving hypnotic suggestions to our sub-conscious mind all day long, and these can be negative or positive (or merely neutral of course). But beware – if you are regularly exposing yourself to negative imagery then it follows that you are likely to feel unhappy and dissatisfied.

So every now and then just 'check-in' and see what's going on in your head. Do this particularly when you find yourself feeling down or anxious. What have you been imagining? If you've been thinking about a future event, have you been imagining it going badly? If thinking about an upsetting past event, have you been running it through your mind again and again? These negative suggestions to your unconscious mind will be sabotaging your attempts to feel good and enjoy your life. So what images would be more helpful? Take your time to create images of how you'd *like* things to be, not how you *don't* want them to be. Remember we get more of what we focus on, so focus on what you want.

> Take your time to create images of how you'd *like* things to be, not how you *don't* want them to be. Remember we get more of what we focus on, so focus on what you *want*.

7.8 Accepting your Fallibility!

We are all fallible human beings – yes that means you too! Take a moment to do this simple exercise. First imagine yourself, represented by a big letter 'I'. Now think of all of the many aspects of your 'self'- roles you play, skills, things you do and so on. They are the little 'i's' which are dotted around within the big 'I': eg driver, son, motivator, cook, animal lover, gardener, swimmer, lover, house-keeper, communicator, dancer.... thoughtful, caring, fun, hard working – there are so many possibilities.

My point it that, because we are good at some things and not others, that doesn't make us worthless. Of course, you might say, that's obvious. But is it? You may *think* that, but do you really believe it? Remember, as a perfectionist you are constantly judging yourself, often against impossible standards. It may be almost unconscious which makes it even more powerful. Bringing those thoughts up to the surface where you can become aware of them and challenge them is the key.

You are fallible like every other person on this planet – get used to it!! We all have positive and negative aspects to us and we are all fallible. Learning to accept yourself (and others) warts and all is an important lesson in life. Accepting that nothing is certain, nothing is perfect is important if you are to live a fulfilling life, without unnecessary pain . You can either try to be perfect and end up miserable or you can aim to be human and *imperfect*, and feel empowered and enriched by life.

> You are fallible like every other person on this planet – get used to it!! We all have positive and negative aspects to us and we are all fallible. Learning to accept yourself, warts and all is such an incredible relief.

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8 Changing Your Behaviour

So we've looked at how you can start to make changes to the way you think, and now we're going to look at how the way you behave can accelerate those positive changes, ensuring you are no longer a victim of your perfectionistic traits.

8.1 Becoming desensitised

Exposure is the best strategy for desensitising yourself to situations that trigger intense negative reactions, such as fear or anger. It can be particularly helpful for perfectionists, who so often avoid doing particular things in order to minimise unpleasant feelings. There really is no way round this problem if you are to conquer those fears - you have to confront those situations which make you feel uncomfortable. What is unlikely to work is sticking your head in the sand with some vague idea that 'one day' you'll manage it.

You will need to *purposefully* expose yourself to being imperfect, something that would normally cause anxiety, frustration or discomfort. And this needs to be done repeatedly so that you become desensitised and slowly begin to feel more relaxed about things. If you think about it, that's how you have learned to cope with most things in life – we can get used to things.

With perfectionism this works by teaching you that even if they make mistakes the consequences are usually not 'terrible'. Even if your performance doesn't reach the highest standard the situation is likely to be manageable. So you can practice by deliberately putting yourself in situations where you would previously have felt ashamed or anxious. It will almost certainly help if, before doing it in real life, you repeatedly vividly imagine dealing with the situation, however there's nothing like the real thing. Here are some examples:

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- Leave the house untidy when you go to work
- When playing sport, deliberately miss a shot or lose a match

- Invite friends over and provide food that is 'ok', rather than 'perfect'.
- Show up for a meeting with your boss at the wrong time
- Send an email without checking it
- Do a 'good enough' job on a piece of work
- Go to work without ironing your shirt/ putting on make-up etc.

Practise regularly and often, and expect to feel uncomfortable when you lower your exacting standards in this way – the important thing is to complete the task. Take comfort from the knowledge that each time you do expose yourself you're getting closer to your goal of reducing the anxiety. You may feel more stressed or irritable temporarily *but* gradually the discomfort will reduce. If you want to do things more slowly you can try 'graded exposure', i.e. instead of going straight for the most anxiety provoking situation, build up to it by trying easier versions first.

Go on - dare to be average sometimes! It's very liberating.

8.2 Becoming Less Driven

Are you constantly working harder and faster, and putting in longer hours? Do you spend almost all of your time thinking about, or doing some form of work? The classic 'workaholic' even when not at work is dogged by thoughts and worries about their responsibilities. They become hyper-stimulated and find it very difficult to wind down or switch off. They find it almost impossible to relax, to feel free - they can't seem to stop.

The driven personality is often known as a Type A Personality. They experience more stress than others and are more susceptible to health problems – you have 40% more chance of a heart attack if you demonstrate extreme Type A behaviour, as follows:

- Competitive
- Ambitious
- Aggressive or hostile

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- Fast walking, talking, speaking
- Finishes others' sentences
- Does too many things at once

But you can learn to modify that behaviour if you decide to. If you are working long hours – who is making you? Or are you choosing to? For many obsessive workaholics their sense of identity depends far too much on their professional role, and if they are less than outstanding, then they are 'worthless'. One stressed and unhappy client told me "I don't know who I am outside of my work any more". Her work/life balance desperately needed redressing.

Why not take a leaf out of the Type B's book? Take a more relaxed, less urgent and more balanced approach to life. This type feels less conflict with others and is able to work at a more constant pace. You might expect the Type A to be the more successful, but there is no appreciable difference between the two in this regard. There are several possible explanations for this. Type A's may alienate others because of their drive and may miss out on important learning opportunities in their quest to get ahead. The Type B on the other hand, might have a reputation for better 'people' skills and may learn a wider array of skills. In reality we all have characteristics of both types, but do we do tend towards one or the other. However it isn't set in stone – we can always choose to change our behaviour.

Becoming less driven means taking more time for yourself . Make sure you have a lunch break, perhaps go for a walk, you'll feel more relaxed and more energised if you do. Don't work late or take work home as a regular thing – every now and again is fine, but not as a rule. Long working hours does not equate to high performance. If your job requires you to work from home, confine it to one room, preferably one you can shut the door on and walk away from.

> You need a proper life outside of work, otherwise slowly you find your world shrinks – your work colleagues are your only friends, and you hardly see your family.

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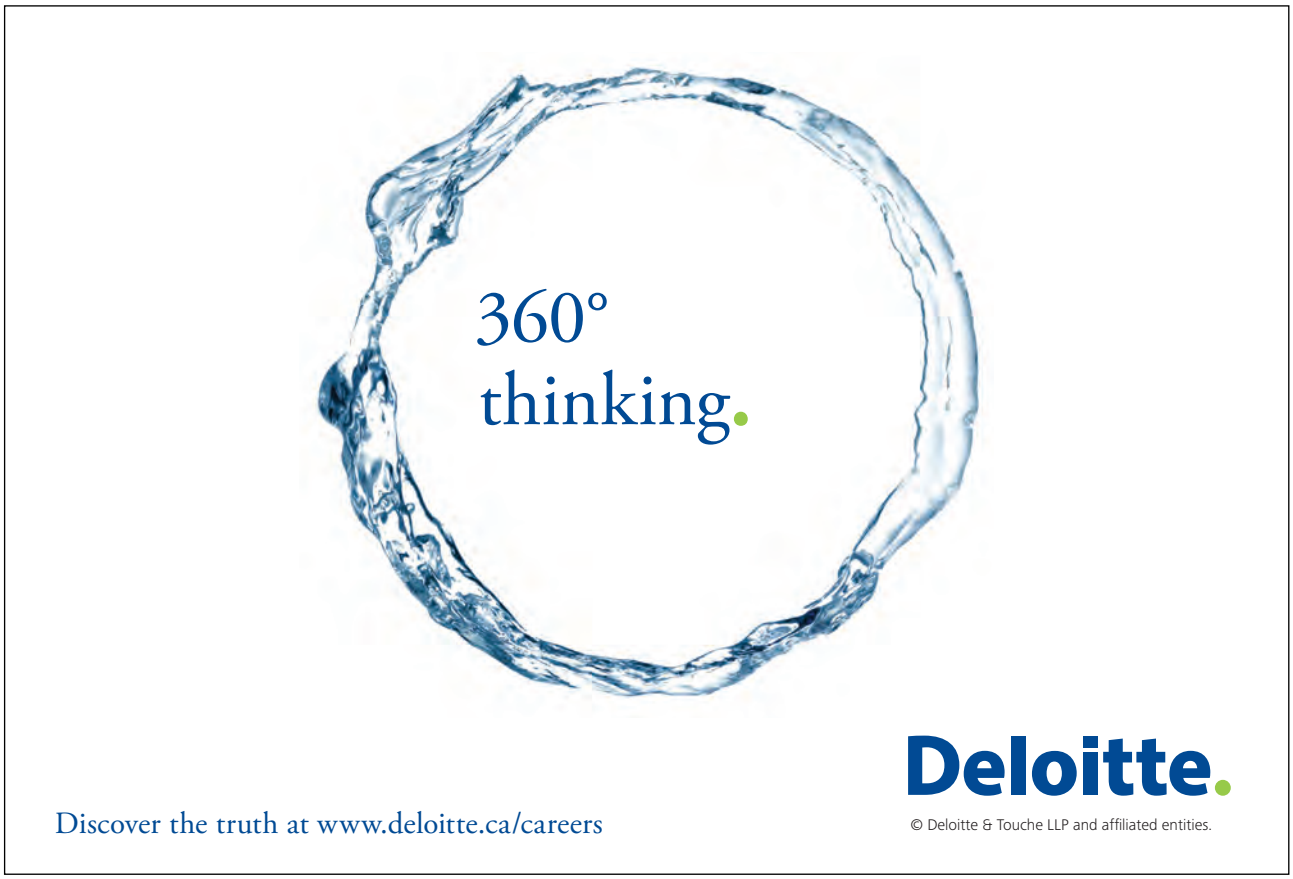
Just a word of caution – if you are spending too much time at work instead of at home with your family - perhaps there's a reason you're avoiding going home. Be honest with yourself. If that's the case perhaps you should urgently turn your attention to your home life in an effort to sort things out before it's too late.

And make it a rule not to work late into the evening otherwise your sleep will be affected. You really do need time to relax and have some fun – to recharge your batteries. People like me see too many clients suffering from 'burn out' – where their batteries are not just low, but flat. When that happens it tends to take some time to recover. Your health and well being *must* be your top priority.

8.3 Improving your Communication

By its very nature perfectionism will affect the way we communicate with others, and of course that will vary depending on the type of perfectionism and how we are affected, for example:

- We may react in a disapproving, judgemental and critical way when others don't meet our exacting standards.
- In our efforts to gain the approval of others, or in the fear that people might find us uninteresting or unimportant, we may communicate in a rather non-assertive (or passive) way. This can result in not asking for what we want or need; pretending to agree with others when actually we don't; or perhaps taking on a task when we would prefer not to. The classic difficulty that many of us have with the idea of saying 'no'.
- We might react defensively when we feel criticised, and that can come across as aggressive.



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- Listening is a key part of communication and because perfectionists are too often focussing on themselves they often fail to listen effectively. This tends to reduce self-confidence and leads to misunderstandings.

8.4 Becoming Assertive

Being assertive is about standing up for your own rights, whilst respecting the rights of others. It's about direct, honest communication – about taking responsibility for your own communication and behaviour. It's not being passive – which is putting up with all sorts, and it's not being aggressive - which is getting your own way no matter what. We tend to use one style of behaviour more than the others, and it can vary according to the particular situation/relationship.

There are 4 general styles of communication:

- **Aggressive:** dominating, loud, impatient, angry, rigid, intolerant, intimidating.
- **Passive**: feels intimidated, can't say no, doesn't speak up, no eye contact, defensive body language, putting up with all sorts.
- **Passive/aggressive** (or indirectly aggressive): sulking, manipulating, withdrawn, blaming, goading, sabotaging , withholding information.
- **Assertive:** confident, open, honest, tolerant, take more risks, respect others, responsible, co-operative, grounded. Responding rather than reacting.

The rules for being assertive:-

- Be clear and direct. Know what you want to say and say it concisely. Use short sentences. Repeat if necessary.
- Don't criticise the *person*, only their behaviour.
- Listen. A key communication skill that most of us use far too little. People just don't listen to each other.
- Use 'I' statements, for example 'I feel angry when…', not 'You make me angry when…' This shows you are taking responsibility or your own feelings.
- During the discussion take your time, and use calm, deep breaths if feeling anxious.
- Avoid constantly 'whinging' or blaming others. This just makes you feel more stressed – and it's contagious!
- Be open and honest – admit when you're wrong.
- Be positive and confident. Say to yourself – 'I can do this!' Replace any negative image with a positive one. Use confident open body language.
- Don't assume you know how the other person will react. Lots of people are people pleasers, worried about upsetting others. Low self-worth leads to wanting to be liked, or putting others' needs first. Better to go for respect.
- Manage your personal anxiety. Perhaps talk it over with someone beforehand and work out how to approach the problem.
- Look for a 'win/win' outcome

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8.5 Parent Adult Child

This is another way of looking at effective communication, and dovetails nicely with the rules for being assertive. There is a wonderful model from the Transactional Analysis school of psychology, created by Eric Berne. This is the 'Parent Adult Child' model, which can be distilled down to quite a simple theory. It goes like this: within each of us are three 'ego' states – the parent, the adult and the child – we can choose to operate from any one of those, at any given moment.

The 'Parent' is our ingrained voice of authority (can be nurturing or controlling and critical) - a kind of tape recording from our (real) parents, teachers, older people. It is made up of a huge number of hidden and overt recorded playbacks and is formed by external events and influences upon us as we grow through early childhood. It is our 'taught' concept of life**.**

The 'Child' is our internal reactions and feelings as we try to make sense of the world (can be co-operative or resistant, or spontaneous). This is the emotional data within each of us. When anger or despair dominates reason, the Child is in control. The 'child' is our 'felt' concept of life.

The 'Adult' is where we think objectively and determine action for ourselves, based on our experience, and it is the means by which we keep our Parent and Child under control. If we are to change our Parent or Child this must usually be done through our adult. Adult is our 'Thought' concept of life.

> Within each of us are three 'ego' states – the parent, the adult and the child – at any given moment we can choose to operate from any one of those.

When two people are communicating (that's the 'transaction' bit) it is normally best if both are operating from the same ego state. So if both are in 'nurturing parent' mode (e.g. commiserating about the misfortunes of a mutual friend) that's fine, or if in 'spontaneous child' mode (e.g playing or making love) that's fine too.

The main problem comes when there is a 'crossed' transaction – the most common of which is when one person is communicating in their 'critical parent' state the other person will often find themselves responding in their 'child' state.

Think about a time when someone was very critical towards you - perhaps aggressive or belittling. How did you feel? Quite possibly you reacted from your 'child'. Did you feel upset, defensive, angry? Did you sulk or roll your eyes? Did you metaphorically stamp you feet? When the child comes forward you are unlikely to be assertive or rational.

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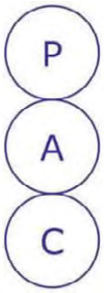

Generally speaking then it is best if we are able to communicate from our 'adult', it is the best means of achieving healthy and effective communication. So what can you do to get out of the game? And a game is exactly what it is, because we repeat these patterns again and again. Here's the key – if you want to move the other person into their reasonable 'adult' state you have to get into *your* adult state. When you do that, there's a good chance you will pull them into theirs. Here's an example:

Boss: "I thought I told you to get that report to me by today, so where is it! If I don't have those figures for the board meeting tomorrow it'll be down to you! I knew I should have done it myself!"

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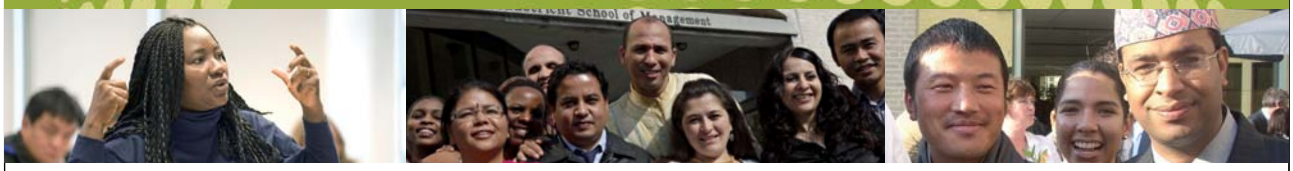

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You (in your adult): "I know you wanted it for today and I'm really sorry I haven't been able to finish it. As you know Mike has been away and I've had his clients on the phone all day. I appreciate it's not ideal, but I will get it to you first thing tomorrow in plenty of time for your meeting"

At this point, even though he might not be happy, your boss is now less likely to continue with his aggressive tone. You are being reasonable and objective, taking a problem-solving approach to the issue. Sometimes it takes a few attempts, but it works most of the time. You are no longer playing the game, and since it takes two, neither is he. Knowing about this theory could help you in many situations. A question for you - how often do *you* operate in your 'critical parent' state? The same rules apply – get into your 'adult' if you want to improve your communication - and your relationships!

If you feel you need some further help with your communication style and would like to become more assertive and spend more time in your 'adult' state, there's lots of reading material out there. You might benefit from attending a training course or having some coaching sessions.

8.6 Dealing with criticism

As a perfectionist, when you feel criticised it is very likely that you will react in your 'child' ego state, with a strong urge to react defensively. The problem then is that the discussion becomes polarised – you against me. If however you were to *respond* (rather than give a knee jerk *reaction*) and do it from your 'adult' ego state things are likely to go much better. Constructive criticism can give you important clues on how to improve your performance . If the criticism you're receiving is pointed or harsh, it's okay to remind others (and yourself) that mistakes are a great way to learn.

Listening is key - it involves actually *hearing* what the other person has to say and making a genuine attempt to understand their point of view. Perfectionism can get in the way of listening, because if you are overly critical of the other person you will be focusing on their mistakes, and if overly critical of yourself you may miss important aspects of what they are saying because you are too focused on your own feelings of inadequacy – thinking about how you're coming across, what you'll say next – and how you'll say it. Also when we are anxious or feel threatened it tends to block our ability to hear and we are less available to understanding others.

Listening is key - it involves actually *hearing* what the other person has to say and making a genuine attempt to understand their point of view.

Here are some of the main points to help you:

Taking criticism

- First *listen* – it's very powerful and gives you time to collect your thoughts.
- Ask for more information, clarification or examples in order to find out the exact nature of the criticism.

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- Ask for time to consider, think about it.
- If you feel defensive ask yourself why – what's really going on here?
- Even if you don't think there's any truth in it (*and there usually is a grain of truth*), accept it as their perception of reality. Be honest, not defensive. If it's fair, then agree – it can be incredibly liberating!
- You may need to simply accept it (even if you don't like it), then discuss and negotiate changes.
- If you disagree, say so clearly and confidently. And then let it go.

Giving criticism

- Always do it in private.
- Acknowledge the positive as well as negative.
- Avoid becoming too personal.
- Avoid exaggeration.
- Criticise the behaviour *not* the person.
- Describe your feelings (if appropriate) and how their behaviour affects you.
- *Listen* to the response.
- Be specific about change if required.
- Explain positive benefits of changing and if necessary consequences of not changing.
- Remember that people resist what they feel they can't afford to be true.

Body language is a vital component of our communication with others - in fact if your body language says one thing and your words another, the other person is likely to respond more to the former. We are much more intuitive than we realise. We interpret these non-verbal signs at a more sub-conscious level, and they have a powerful effect on us.

This includes things like your voice (tone, volume, inflection, speed), facial expressions and body position and posture. So if you are generally disapproving of others, even if your words are not critical it might come across in more subtle ways, such as arm folding, frowning, accusing tone etc. Becoming aware of how you might be perceived, is another way of ensuring you don't inflict your perfectionistic standards on others.

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8.7 Stop Procrastinating, Start Prioritising

In Chapter 6 we talked about the reasons why we procrastinate, and hopefully this has got you thinking about yourself and why you put things off. Is this scenario familiar to you? When faced with a task, as long as the deadline is some way away, then, in theory you have time to make it perfect. But when the deadline gets closer there is no longer time to do a perfect job, and in the end (and not without suffering a degree of stress) you have to eventually just sit down and do an imperfect, but adequate job. How much better it would have been had you given yourself permission to do a less than perfect job at the very start! So is there something you're putting off? You might as well get on with it – it's never going to be perfect anyway! Here are some tips:

- Know when to let go. As soon as you have finished and checked a job, send it on its way. Good enough is, after all good enough.
- Ask for help if you need it.
- Learn to say No. Be assertive about what you are or aren't able to do. People will respect you more.
- Look at other people whom you respect – do they spend as much time making things'perfect'?
- Remember that avoidance makes things so much worse.

Do you have difficulty prioritising? As you go through your day do you have trouble deciding which task to focus on in case it's the wrong one? If so you will be wasting a great deal of time and energy. It really does help to prioritise at the beginning of every day.

1. **Write your list for the day**. It doesn't matter at this stage if it's too long.

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2. **Then whittle it down a *manageable* list.** I often categorise tasks using the 4 D's technique: **Do it, Diary it, Delegate it, Dump it.** Be focused and firm with yourself about what really needs doing and what doesn't. If you have difficulty with that, ask yourself 'what's the worst that can happen if it doesn't get done?'
3. **Break tasks down into bit size chunks** - especially important for those difficult tasks that are worrying you. This is a vital step. You may need to break things down into even smaller steps if you still find yourself avoiding getting down to work.
4. **Next, number the items in order of priority.** This is essential if you're someone who regularly wastes time trying to decide what to do next. This way you can move straight from one task to the next on the list because you've already decided the order in which to do them. It's often best to start with the most difficult thing because it's usually the most important. It feels great to get it out of the way and the rest of the day will be more productive.
5. **Focus on one thing at a time.** Move all your other work out of the way and be strict about being distracted by something else that might suddenly seem important. Just note it down and stick to the plan. Having said that of course we need to be realistic - unexpected problems and interruptions will always be part of working life!
6. **Be realistic** about what you can actually do in your day, otherwise you set yourself up to fail. And be aware of your energy cycles and try to work with them

If you want to know more about the issue of time management there are books galore. However for me the key is to know *why* you have problems, and then if you follow these few simple rules you won't go far wrong.

Take a moment now to think of 3 things you are putting off and make a plan for getting on with them.

8.8 Making Decisions

Your life is a journey not a destination. Everything you do gives you experience and teaches you more about yourself and the world. Perfectionists often spend lots of time trying to make the 'right' decision, and sometimes if the anxiety becomes too intense they will avoid making any decisions. Instead they accept the status quo and miss opportunities to make progress in life. Being indecisive, holding onto your options, doubting, avoiding commitment can be expensive – in terms of time, energy spent, lost opportunities. There's a lot of truth in the old adage "Not to decide *is* to decide – and often for the worse".

Keep in mind that whatever you chose doesn't need to define the rest of your life, and *every* choice has benefits to offer you. We've all heard people say "I'm in a no win situation". Instead, try to think of each choice in terms of 'no lose', after all you never really know what would have happened if you'd taken another path? And to be honest, how often are the consequences of a decision 'catastrophic'.

Focus on being more accepting and pleased with any positive outcomes from your decisions. As long as you remain overwhelmingly concerned about a negative outcome, you'll never want to make a decision. On the other hand, if you can be ok with whatever happens, you'll be much more able to make a decision. What you are actually doing is lowering the amount riding on having the most perfect outcome, and allow yourself to settle for second best sometimes. Approaching things this way allows for complete freedom of choice without thinking in terms of failure.

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When it comes to important decisions, of course you will want to consider all the options, but then you need to go with your 'gut feeling' and pursue that with all your energy. You may feel apprehensive about change, but if you connect with your most visceral feelings you'll know what feels right. Here's one way of knowing if it's simply apprehension about change or really feels wrong. The former will usually involve lots of mental activity - going over options, worrying about how things will be. The latter is a much more physical feeling, an unpleasant feeling in your 'gut'. If you're feeling this, then all the thinking in the world won't make it feel right.

Whatever you decide, whether a major or minor decision, once you've made your decision, swing into action and don't look back. What makes a decision seem good or bad is largely dependent on what you tell yourself after you've made it.

No more sitting on the sidelines 'waiting' for the perfect job, relationship, house, business opportunity. Or waiting for the perfect time to begin writing that book, retraining, going for promotion, joining a choir, or starting a family. Go for what you want in life. Take responsibility for your own future – making mistakes along the way no doubt, but at least you went for it!

> What makes a decision seem good or bad is largely dependent on what you tell yourself after you've made it.

8.9 Reclaiming your Life

Is it possible that you've become bogged down in trying so hard, that you've forgotten to take care of your own needs – forgotten how to lighten up? What do you currently do in your daily/weekly routine that you do just for yourself? Do you laugh, have fun?

8.9.1 Enjoy the moment

Most of our time is spent either thinking about the future or the past, and we forget to enjoy the moments that make up the journey. Yesterday is gone and tomorrow has yet to arrive. This moment is the only one that is real. So resolve to take time to appreciate more the simple things in life …enjoy the changing seasons, the smell of hot coffee, snuggling down in a warm bed.

Take pleasure from those things that appeal to the senses. Tune in to the wonders around you. As I sit here now in my little summerhouse, I glance out of the window and notice the sweetest little bluetit sitting on the wall watching me. I find myself smiling – a moment of joy. I even convince myself we have a fleeting connection, as two creatures just getting on with life.

We are not machines and yet much of modern life feels like being on a constantly moving treadmill. Be grateful for being alive, because that feeling of gratitude (irrespective of whether you are religious or not) is a joyful feeling and … good feelings bring more good feelings!

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8.9.2 Learn to Relax

In my work I meet so many people who have forgotten how to relax. They are constantly tense and always seem to feel as if there's something else they should be doing. I think this is particularly true of women, many of whom are struggling to juggle work with their responsibilities at home. They strive in vain to do everything perfectly and take little time for their own needs. If we don't take care of ourselves as a priority how can we take care of others? And what message are we giving to our children? As they say – put your own oxygen mask on first. This is a really serious problem for women. They strive to please everyone else and can end up feeling resentful and yet deeply guilty if they please themselves sometimes.

So, whether male or female, if you are feeling stressed, then you would be well advised to include periods of relaxation into your routine. We have an activity/rest cycle and if you continue to ignore that rest part, you build up a deficit and sooner or later become ill. The only way to develop the habit is to actually do it. Make it a priority, otherwise you find yourself continually putting it off.

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Try to practice deep relaxation or meditation on a regular basis - it only needs 10-15 minutes a day and you will feel so much better. There are lots of ways to get your body into the habit of relaxing, and the more you do it the easier it becomes. There are countless relaxation recordings, or maybe you prefer some relaxing music, whatever suits you. A relatively new form of meditation called Mindfulness is getting lots of attention at the moment. It's simple and easy to do and there's lots of information out there if you'd like to know more about it.

The mind is a bit like the ocean – the water is choppy and chaotic on the surface, but deep down it's a quiet, peaceful deep blue. We spend almost all of our time on the surface - in the busy surf, pulled and battered by the ebb and flow of daily life .

Deep relaxation calms the ocean and allows the body to regain its balance. It stops the noise and gives you the chance to explore and acknowledge the deeper levels of your mind. It helps creativity, our ability focus, levels of energy, feelings of well-being and much more. On days when you can't find time, then try some simple deep breathing, as if breathing into your abdominal area. I like the idea of 'surfing' the breath. You should do this every hour or two throughout your day. Set an alarm on your computer or phone.

People often find it difficult to draw a line between work and home, so when you get home set aside a few minutes to practise your breathing - breathe out 'work' energy and breathe in revitalised 'home' energy. Every time you breathe out – relax your shoulders and jaw a little more. It's a way of acknowledging the transition. Of course that does mean *not* working at home afterwards!

8.9.3 Get some Support

Whatever the reasons for feeling stressed, whether directly as a result of your perfectionistic tendencies, to do with your work or home life - support is the No 1 buffer. The more pressure, the more support we need. Take a moment to do an audit of your support network by adding a name (or names) to following:

- Someone who makes me feel good about myself…..
- Someone I can rely on in a crisis…..
- Someone I can be totally myself with…..
- Someone who will tell me honestly how I'm doing.....
- Someone I can talk to if I'm worried….
- Someone who really makes me stop and think about what I'm doing…..
- Someone who is lively to be with…..
- Someone who introduces me to new ideas, new interests, new people…..

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Are these relationships as good as they might be? What could you do to invest in them? Do you need to develop some new relationships? If so, how will you do that?

8.9.4 Exercise and Diet

Keeping yourself fit, staying healthy, eating well are all so vital to our mental health. Do you take enough care of your health, remember you are what you eat! Do you make sure that exercise is a priority or do you find reasons why you don't have time. It really needs to be a part of your routine and it must be some form of exercise that you enjoy. If you hate going to the gym, it isn't going to be long before you find excuses for not going. It's somewhat outside of the remit of this book to delve into what constitutes a healthy lifestyle, but I must stress its importance in the context of taking good care of yourself in every way.

8.9.5 Sleep

If you work too hard and worry too much, there's a good chance that your sleep patterns will be disrupted from time to time at least. Here are the main rules for getting a good night's sleep which is so vital to your mental and physical well-being:

1. Try to work out why you aren't sleeping. Then resolve to make the necessary changes.
2. Don't work late in the evening – too much thinking will prevent you from sleeping.
3. Keep a regular time for going to sleep and getting up, even at weekends.

4. The bedroom is only for sleeping, 'easy' reading and lovemaking. No computers, no work, no food. The jury is out on the TV!
5. Regular exercise helps with sleep but not too close to bedtime, 4-6 hours before is best.
6. Have a nice warm bath about an hour before you go to bed – as the body cools down it recognises that as a signal for sleep.
7. Avoid stimulants like alcohol, coffee, cigarettes.
8. Don't eat a meal late in the evening, but a light snack before bed sometimes helps.
9. Ensure your bedroom isn't too warm, too light or too noisy. It's important that your feet are warm.
10. Have a bedtime routine of quiet, calming activities.
11. Do some progressive relaxation – ie going all the way up (or down) your body, tensing, stretching and relaxing the muscles.
12. Don't try! The more you try, the more sleep will elude you. Instead go on an internal journey – anywhere your imagination cares to wonder.

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13. Don't lie down in bed until you feel sleepy.
14. If you don't fall asleep within 30 mins or so, get out of bed, go into another room and do something calming until you are sleepy enough to go back to bed.
15. If you wake up in the night, best not to look at your clock. All it does is make you fret about how many hours are left before you have to get up!
16. Sleep just long enough – not too much.

8.9.6 Have Some Fun and Take a Few Risks

Do you take time for enjoyment? I know how easy it is to find your life is so full of commitments that there is no time for fun. If this is you then take a moment to stand back and think about priorities again. Experiencing the lighter fun side of life is important if you are to keep yourself in a balanced healthy state of mind. If you want to remain well then it's not an option to keep your nose permanently attached to the grindstone! Have you shut yourself off from experiencing a lightness of being, pure pleasure, joy, laughter?

> "The amount of happiness that you have depends on the amount of freedom you have in your heart." Thich Nhat Hanh

These feelings release you from your perfectionism. You aren't judging or competing, worrying or striving. So what could you include in your life that would do that for you? It might be seeing more of your family or particular friends, going ice-skating, joining a choir, getting out in the garden, painting...or a hundred other things.

But remember, it's important that you don't approach the idea of having fun as something you 'should' be good at, otherwise it becomes something else. In fact why not take a risk and try something you always fancied doing but doubted you'd be good at. How liberating that would be, to happily accept and indeed enjoy being mediocre (or no good) at something.

If each pursuit is not a review of your personal worth, then your world opens up. You can detach from the outcome. You might even start something and not need to finish it. Now, that's a concept. Fun could just be fun—no 1st place ribbons attached.

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9 Strategies for Life

9.1 Enjoying Your Work

Develop a positive mental attitude. That includes being aware of your negative thinking and challenging it. If you are giving a presentation, are your thoughts interfering with your performance (we call them PITS - Performance Interfering Thoughts) eg 'They can see I'm nervous!'? If so replace them with more helpful, realistic thoughts (PETS - Performance Enhancing Thoughts) such as 'everyone gets a bit nervous when they give a presentation – it's normal!' Lighten up - don't take yourself so seriously! Work on your sense of humour - it's a great way of counteracting your perfectionism.

Lighten up - don't take yourself too seriously. Work on your sense of humour - it's a great way of counteracting your perfectionism.

Question your assumptions. For example, notice when you are jumping to conclusions about what other people might be thinking. Notice when you are taking responsibility for something that is not your fault. That way you gradually develop resilience and won't take things so personally.

Take on challenges. When we are anxious we find ourselves avoiding challenges because they are uncomfortable. However then our comfort zone gradually shrinks and we find ourselves doing less and less. So it's important to keep moving forward and trying new things, in spite of the discomfort. You *can* stand it!

Work at giving up control. You know that being over-controlling is irrational and born out of deep seated insecurity. It tends to make us increasingly rigid and judgemental in our attitudes and that makes us difficult to work with. Be patient with yourself. It takes time to change long-standing habits, but little by little you will find it gets easier.

Keep the big picture in mind! That means being careful to notice when you are becoming too bogged down in the detail. Get into the habit of standing back and rechecking priorities. Ask yourself 'what's the best use of my time right now?'

Communicate assertively. Feeling excessive concern about mistakes or worrying about how you are perceived can lead you to communicate ineffectively, but by working on a positive frame of mind you will begin to feel a growing sense of confidence. Once you begin saying 'no' when you need to, you will notice that, amazingly enough, nothing dreadful happens! So it's about thinking and behaving differently, and slowly it feels more natural *and* you get results.

Be more decisive. Take a problem solving approach and focus on what needs to be done; prioritise and either do it now or schedule a time to do it later. If you're often rather muddled in your thinking (because there's so much to deliberate about if you're a perfectionist!) it may take a little time but you *can* develop a more decisive habit. You will need to be firm with yourself and put some energy behind your decision making. It will benefit you in your own work and in your work with others too.

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Remember that a tentative attitude stops you from doing your best and if you are to realise your full potential and fully *experience* your life, you must sometimes put aside doubts. By not actively making decisions you find that life *happens* to you rather than you having directed it. Even though when you do that you can blame circumstances (or other people), as opposed to taking personal responsibility for how things turn out, it's unlikely you'll make the most of opportunities for a more fulfilling life.

> Don't confuse rational caution with an irrational refusal to decide.

Of course we all make bad choices, but what makes a decision register as either good or bad depends mainly on what you tell yourself after you've made it. If you agonise over each decision your mind will automatically form a connection between the act of deciding and pain.

Get organised. Make sure you know what's ahead. Are there meetings you need to be prepared for? Make sure you are well-prepared, have the necessary documents and arrive on time. And make a determined effort to keep up the momentum.

Take care not to be too demanding or judgemental of others. If you know you are prone to this, remind yourself of the need to be realistic and reasonable. We are *all* fallible (you too), and if you can modify this behaviour you will find others much more willing to co-operate with you.

Be honest with yourself. If you find yourself feeling off balance or emotional (angry, upset, guilty, anxious, depressed...) ask yourself what's really going on. There's usually *something* we can do to improve things, and if there is, then resolve to do whatever it is. If, on the other hand this is outside of your control, you may need to accept that. You can only control the controllables.

Be kind to yourself. Address any imbalance between your working and home life. Make sure you take time out for relaxation and fun – you deserve it. And if you make a mistake, at home or at work, learn from it and immediately pick yourself up and move on. Accepting yourself, just as you are, is a challenge, but one worth taking on! Remember the worse you feel about yourself, the greater the drive to be 'perfect'.

So which of the above are areas where you would like to make some improvement? Identify them and resolve to start now. Why not get yourself a coach or someone else who can support you and keep you on track whilst you begin making those changes.

> Remember, the worse you feel about yourself, the greater the drive to be 'perfect'.

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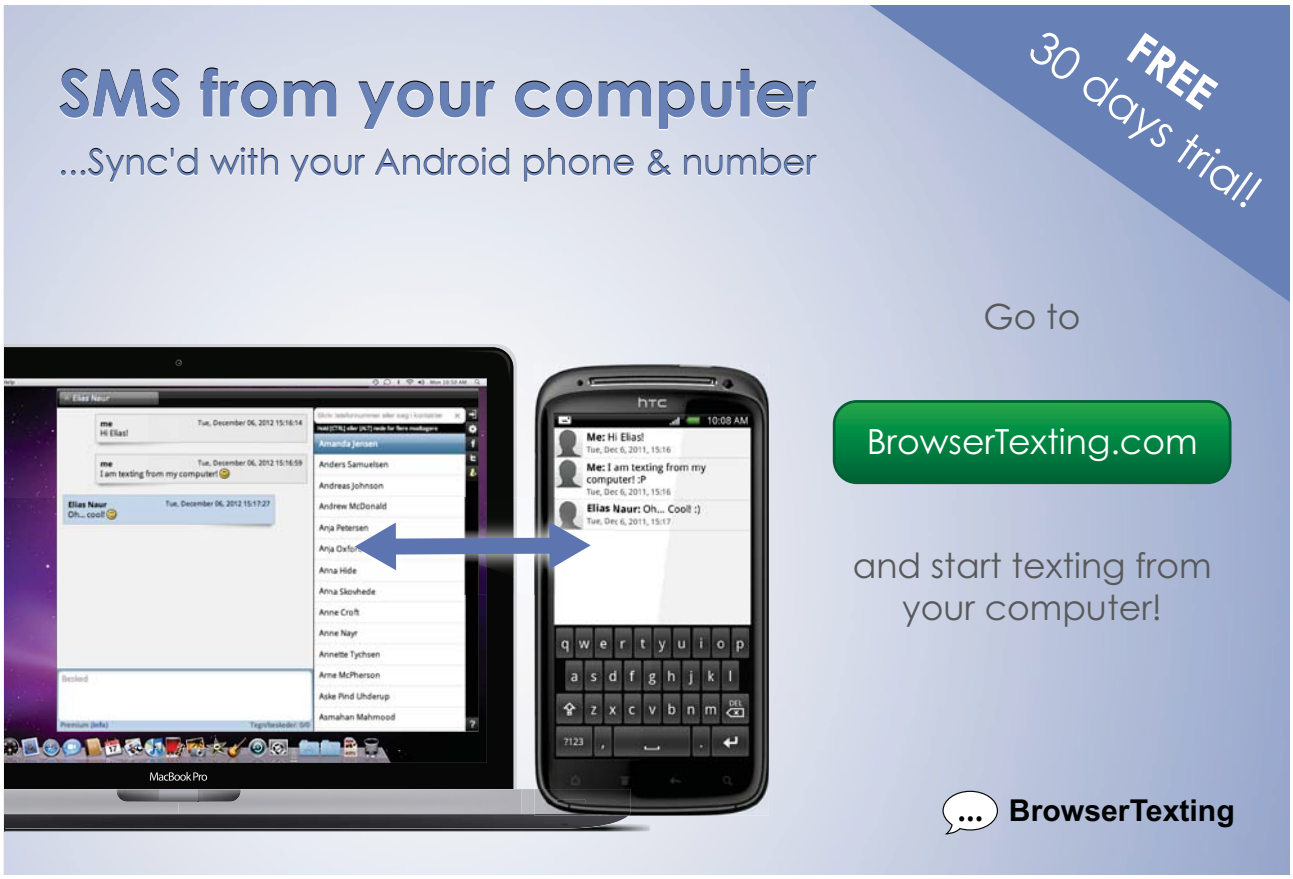
9.2 Becoming a More Effective Leader

Perfectionism is a serious leadership issue today, with far reaching consequences for individuals and organisations. It is quite common for perfectionists to perform well until they move into a management or leadership job. Many go from a role which requires specific technical skills, to a role which means achieving results through others - and that involves empowering those who work for them. But if you confront your negative emotions and start to make small changes, you can gain a new perspective, achieve greater success and enjoy your work more. So what are the key areas the perfectionist needs to pay particular attention to?

Micromanagement is a very common problem as the new manager struggles to impose his authority. There are a number of disadvantages to this - it uses a great deal of energy as you struggle to get to grips with the minutiae of what others do; it creates stress all round; it leads to a decline in motivation ..and it destroys creativity and prevents you from doing the more important 'big picture' tasks.



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So you need to *stop* thinking of your staff as people who need to be controlled. Make sure they know what is expected, what outcome you want, and then let them get on with it. In other words don't tell them 'how', tell them 'what'. Give them the latitude to do things their own way and to make decisions themselves. By providing the answers and trying to 'fix' everything yourself you rob them of the chance to work things out for themselves and of the opportunity to learn.

Stress levels will be low and creativity high if you give people the chance to come up with alternative (and potentially better) ways of doing things. And you will create an atmosphere of trust – a vital ingredient of a successful team.

Fill your diary with more strategic tasks so you simply don't have time to get over-involved and meddle where there is no need. And evaluate the risk rationally - if you do stand back in this way, what's the likelihood of a 'catastrophic' outcome?

> Don't tell them 'how', tell them 'what'. Give them the latitude to do things their own way and to make decisions themselves.

Get to know them. Giving people responsibility does not meant that you should stay in your office all day and ignore them. Far from it - people need to see you around the place, pass the time of day or share a light hearted moment with you. Just because you are the boss doesn't mean you have to keep yourself separate from those who work for you. Don't be afraid to connect with your people, because if they like you as a person, if you treat them well, then they will do almost anything for you. Aside from that, it makes everyone's working day so much more pleasant. Work should after all be enjoyable, and that starts at the top.

Stop making all the decisions. You don't have all the answers all the time. The more you can find opportunities for people to contribute to the decision-making process and encourage people to have their say, the more your employees will feel connected and loyal to the organization.

Create a culture where mistakes are OK. If you don't make mistakes, the chances are you are not stretching yourself. If your staff are allowed to feel that mistakes are part of trying new ideas rather than something to feel bad about, or shamed of, then they will take more risks on your behalf. Of course that means you must admit your *own* mistakes. If you get it wrong, say so. Managers don't have to be infallible! Your staff will respect you more if you are able to admit your mistakes, and then go about sorting out a solution. And of course it makes you a great role model.

Focus on developing the strengths of each team member rather than managing merely for results. Identify each person's development needs and commit to following through on them. When people are growing and improving, their enthusiasm and effectiveness is greater. Endorse effort and growth instead of making a big issue of failure or mistakes.

Never, ever, humiliate anyone on your staff team. If you are annoyed with someone on your team, or they have done something wrong, make sure you keep your cool. If you humiliate or patronise, or criticise excessively he or she will hold a grudge against you for a long time, and their work will suffer too. This type of behaviour spreads ill-feeling in teams, creating a negative atmosphere and reduced productivity.

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Communicate clearly. It is your responsibility to ensure that people understand what you expect from them, so be clear in your requests and communicate clearly. Ask if people have understood what you are asking for, and make it clear that they can come back to you if they have any questions or need further clarification. I believe that a huge amount of time is wasted by people trying to work out what the boss actually meant! You need to take full responsibility for how you are heard and remember that whatever it is you have to say it's likely you can put it across in a positive way.

Listen, listen, listen! If there are unhappy or disgruntled people in your team, you can guarantee that at some point they have tried to share their concerns with you. It is likely you were not listening (or didn't want to listen), or perhaps your initial reaction made the person think twice about bringing the problem to you. Listening is one of the greatest skills to develop, regardless of your role.

Enlist the help of others when you need it. Remember you don't have to know it all. There ar almost certainly people around you who you can go to for advice and support, and you might consider getting an internal or external coach to help you develop a plan for change, and follow it through.

Tolerate the discomfort! Remember that you are likely to feel some anxiety whilst making these changes, but that is simply a sign that you are making progress. So if it feels uncomfortable remind yourself that it will get easier and the benefits will make it all worthwhile. Work on balancing your life with some proper rest and relaxation.

Take time out. Go back and read Chapter 8.9 again. Remember the rest/activity cycle? If you ignore it for long, then your batteries will be running very low. I know it can be hard to tear yourself away from your work, so you will need to be very firm with yourself. And the benefits are tangible - you get back to work feeling refreshed, re-energised with greater clarity and focus. If you are one of those who regularly works through lunch, then it might help to know that research shows those who take a break at lunch time are more effective in the afternoon. There is no way round it – your body needs *you* to take care of it.

9.3 Working for a Perfectionist

If this is you, you have my sympathy. You probably feel your boss doesn't trust you; that your work is never quite good enough (there may be a total lack of positive feedback); they breathe down your neck and want to know every detail of what you're doing; their controlling behaviour prevents you from coming up with new ideas or generally showing initiative; you spend more time reporting back to them that actually doing the work; you may feel frustrated and your career stifled; they are also likely to be stressed and difficult to communicate with - and stress is contagious so you feel it too!

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So what can you do, other than leave the job and move on (which is always an option)?

We all have to 'manage' our boss. We have to teach them how to manage us effectively and by doing so we help them to become better managers. It may require some effort, but think of it as an investment, after all you need each other in order to be successful.

Ask him (or her) to be clear about what he expects of you. What is your level of responsibility? How often do you need to report back? Does he need to be copied in on this or that? Ask good questions and take notes.

Keep him informed. Tell him that you will keep him in the loop, that you will ensure he has the information he needs to feel confident that everything is under control – then make sure you *do* that! This will build greater trust and gradually you will be given more leeway and allowed to get on with doing things your own way. Be patient – it may take a while but I think it will be worth it.

Ask for regular one-to-one sessions to catch up with your boss. This way you can keep them informed, but also you have a space for asking questions and encouraging him to provide some coaching for you. Be aware though, managers all to easily postpone these meetings when anything more pressing comes along, so let him know they are important to you and to your success in the job. You may need to remind them that your success is their success.

Communicate your confidence in yourself and your ideas. If you come across as positive and assertive he will respect your determination to take responsibility for your own decisions.

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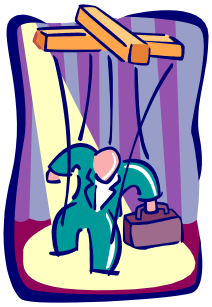

You may need to say you feel overly controlled and that this is affecting your ability to do the job well. Explain how you are feeling and give examples of situations and behaviour which causes you to feel this way. Be careful how you say it though as perfectionists are particularly sensitive to criticism. Make it clear that you want to find a way of working that is acceptable to both of you.

Inject a little humour when you can. Your perfectionistic manager is almost certainly taking himself and the work too seriously, so should be encouraged to lighten up a little. Used appropriately, humour goes a long way towards keeping things in perspective, and building better relationships – both vital to success.

9.4 Improving your Relationships

If your perfectionism is having a negative effect on your relationships then make a decision now to change that. Give yourself permission to let go of some of your controlling behaviour. Small changes can quickly begin to make a difference, and the effect is cumulative:

Listen to your partner (or other people who are important to you). Do they complain about your controlling, hyper-critical behaviour, or your obsession with order and detail? Are you always talking about how things 'should' be? If so accept responsibility for the effect that your behaviour has on others. Remember that this need for control is about *you* and your need to control the *internal* anxiety and chaos. It is not about them. Don't push people away and sabotage your relationships in the pursuit of control and certainty – or you may create what you most fear - be left on your own.

How much fun are you to be around? Someone who nags, criticises and controls isn't going to be easy company. Try not to take yourself so seriously – life is for living, so look for the lighter moments and laugh more!

Think before you criticise. Is it really important enough to make an issue of something you disagree with, or can you let it go in the pursuit of harmony. If not, then can you choose a better time or place to make your point – and can you do it in a way that means you will be *heard*?

Put yourself into the shoes of the other person. Or perhaps imagine you are watching the situation from above, looking down on yourself and the other person? What do you see – honestly? Are you being reasonable and realistic? What's your body language saying? Is there a desire for co-operation or is it more of a 'I'm right, you're wrong' conversation. Remember there is always more than one way to do something, and we all have our own way of seeing things.

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Do you focus on your partner's negative qualities? If so remember that there is the flip side to all of us. In simple terms a negative trait may be seen as an exaggeration of a positive trait. In other words you may like the fact that they are easy going and spontaneous, but then find their untidiness infuriating. So take a few moments every now and then to remind yourself of their positive qualities and be more appreciative of them.

If you have children, is it possible that they feel they never quite measure up? Be aware of what messages you are giving them – they may be subtle, but powerful nevertheless. I'm sure you want to be a positive role model for your children.

Don't let your perfectionism prevent you from pursuing relationships. Whether you hold back because you're afraid it won't amount to anything (fear of failure), or worry you might get hurt, or that they may not measure up - realise that these are all 'what ifs'. We can't predict the future and accepting uncertainty is the only way to live life to the full. It may be uncomfortable at times but there really is no alternative. The fact is you are not perfect, they are not perfect and life is not perfect. What you can control is your determination to be genuine, sincere, open ....and human.

> "In the book of life's questions, the answers are not in the back"
> *Charles M. Schulz, creator of Peanuts (1922 - 2000)*

9.5 Overcoming social anxiety

If you suffer from socially-prescribed perfectionism described in earlier chapters, it's quite possible you will feel anxious in social situations. Do you feel others are scrutinising you negatively or find yourself making assumptions about what people are thinking about you? Do you find yourself thinking that people won't be interested in you, or that you won't have anything interesting to say? Actually the fact is that people are usually so wrapped up in themselves, so busy wondering what you'll think of *them*, what they're going to say next... that they don't really notice how *you* are coming across at all!

The secret in social situations where you feel nervous, is to show an interest in *the other person*. If you want to make contact with new people, to make new friends, you have to be prepared to make the running. Of course that will mean stepping outside of your comfort zone, but it will be worth the effort. Try to approach it as an adventure, as a period of development for you as a person. Keep an open mind and give things a chance rather than dismiss possibilities too soon. And when you find yourself thinking 'what if' or worrying about what people might think, remind yourself that you'd be best to wait and see.

> The secret in social situations where you feel nervous, is to show an interest in the other person.

After all - what's the worst that can happen? You've exercised your confidence 'muscle' and put your worries about what people might think of you to one side, and it will feel easier next time. Do you know the story of the man who complained that he had no friends? The wise man said to him 'There are no friends out there, just strangers waiting to meet you…'

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Don't wait for others to make the effort – take a risk and do it yourself. Even with established friendships why wait for the other person to call you? You call *them* even if you feel you make most of the running. We often have to! When meeting new people try the following:

Focus on the other person, not yourself. Ask them questions and really listen to them. People generally love talking about themselves - it's a subject they know well after all. Research shows that when we show we are interested in others, they usually find us really interesting too – yet we might have said very little about ourselves!

Be authentic, but take on the mantel of courage. You can do this by mentally preparing beforehand. Give yourself lots of positive encouragement, imagine yourself feeling confident and relaxed. Recall a time perhaps when you felt really good about yourself (and don't tell me there haven't been any!) and allow yourself to really experience that feeling.

Join groups. You might find it easier in one-to-one encounters and may be reluctant to join groups – partly due to lack of practise. But joining groups can be fun and it's a great way of increasing your social contacts. Remember that *most* people feel awkward when they join a group - after all once you get through the door you are usually only talking to one or two people at a time anyway. Go on, step outside that of comfort zone and see what happens. What have you got to lose!

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9.6 Living with a Perfectionist

It can be very challenging living with a perfectionist, and of course much will depend upon the degree of their perfectionism and your own personality. But there is no doubt that being on the receiving end of their obsessions and their demanding behaviour *can* be very painful and contribute to a wide spectrum of interpersonal problems. In the end you may decide to end the relationship, but there are some strategies that might help bring about positive change. Most of the following suggestions are aimed at partners of perfectionists, however they will also be helpful if you have a perfectionist in your household or in your immediate family:

Don't become a slave to their perfectionism just because they want things done their way. For example if they are obsessive about tidiness and order it wouldn't be right for you to spend all your time trying to appease them to try and keep the peace. Instead offer to help, but don't allow things to get to the stage where you're doing all the work just to satisfy their demand for things to be done a certain way.

Don't take it personally. If you feel relentlessly criticised by your perfectionist, remember that their senses are so finely tuned that they would find fault with the most saintly of people. If they seem to always ignore or discount your ideas or opinions, remember they do truly fear being influenced or controlled by others. That means that they would behave in this way with *anyone* they were close to. I'm not suggesting you make endless excuses for bad behaviour, however remembering that it isn't about *you* can make their actions and comments a great deal less hurtful.

Avoid digging your heels in or acting defensively as this will only cause you to take up opposing positions and exacerbate the situation. Decide what you *can* tolerate (and perhaps choose to ignore) and what you *can't* put up with. Then focus on improving communication and understanding with regard to the latter specifically.

Your opinions are valid! Don't be tempted to agree with everything the other person says or deny your own personal values, opinions, likes and dislikes. Obsessives tend to spend their lives analysing what is the most logical or efficient course of action, but that still doesn't mean you should be bullied or shamed into going along with it. You're entitled to have your own ideas as to what's important, what's trivial, right or wrong. Think about it before you agree to do something you don't agree with - take time to think it over. You may of course decide to agree to it because you care for them, but don't feel obliged to ignore your own wishes and opinions just to keep the peace.

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One thing you *can* do which can help considerably is to show you are trustworthy, reliable and consistent. Because perfectionists yearn for certainty and predictability, they tend to place a lot of importance on honesty and straight-talking. If you tend to be a 'people pleaser' and find it difficult to say what you want and need, this can be interpreted as indecisiveness or a weakness by a perfectionist. It would be well worth learning to be more assertive.

It's important to recognize when perfectionism becomes abusive. Although of course it would be ridiculous to suggest that all perfectionists become abusive, perfectionism can set the stage for abuse. If you feel compelled to bow to your partner's demands out of fear of retribution - physical or otherwise - then this isn't a healthy situation. A person who is a perfectionist does not have the right to impose his or her will on someone in an unhealthy way.

Focus on building your own self-esteem and independence. If you can nurture your own self-worth then you won't depend on positive feedback from anyone else. You are setting yourself up for a life of emotional turbulence if you rely on the approval or praise of a perfectionist, after all they are much better at expressing what's wrong, not what's right! They feel the need to keep their emotions in check in order to avoid feeling vulnerable, which is why they find it difficult to show positive feelings or appreciation.

Being needy or too dependent on a perfectionist is not a good idea - it will make them anxious and may lead to them withdrawing from you. They are more likely to remain close to you (and respect you) if you are involved in your own interests and not putting all your energy into your relationship with them. If you sense you are becoming too dependent then take steps to rediscover who you are, and strive to become a whole person, independent of any relationship. It may feel strange to start with, but fight any feelings of anxiety or isolation, and you have so much to gain. Never give the perfectionist the idea that your happiness depends entirely on reassurance from them – and make sure it doesn't!

Don't pressurise them. Any direct confrontation or effort to force the person to change will almost certainly end in failure. Instead it's more likely to encourage them to reassert their dominance and result in a power struggle. Of course, that doesn't mean you should silently tolerate the situation. Tell them clearly how you feel and your reasons for asking them to make changes. Rather than making judgemental or demanding statements such as "you must change", try "I would prefer you to do this because (give reason)".

Blaming and criticising will not help, and try to avoid exaggeration, 'always/never' or 'all or nothing' statements. Forget who's wrong or right, instead focus on being reasonable and looking for solutions. Remember that we can only control our *own* behaviour, but that when one person changes, it changes the dynamics of the relationship and encourages the other person to change too.

Appreciate and re-enforce positive changes. Show appreciation where appropriate (don't overdo it) and try to adopt a more light-hearted cheerful attitude. And even if you feel inclined to, don't deliberately withhold affection as a means of on-going punishment. Better to be up front about what's upset you and deal with it in an adult way.

> It can be hard for perfectionists to change their obsessive behaviour, however the more positive you are about your relationship the more inclined they will be to try.

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